

CARLOS FUNCHESS

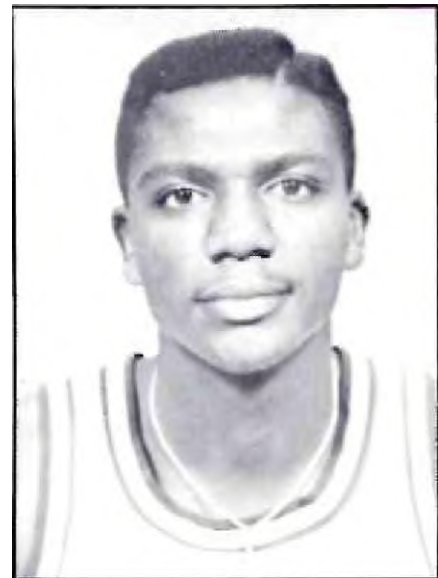
*Note: This is the **first** in a series of three feature stories on this year's inductee into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame, this year's recipient of the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award, and the recipient of the LABC's Don Landry Award. The 2024 inductee will be former University of Louisiana at Monroe star Carlos Funchess. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2024 is former long-time Scotlandville Magnet High School coach Carlos Sample. The Don Landry Award recipient is former long-time Northwestern State University coach and athletic director Tynes Hildebrand.*

CARLOS FUNCHESS PUT THE FUN IN BASKETBALL DURING HIS HEYDAY AS A COLLEGE STAR

By: Paul Letlow
Written for the LABC

MONROE, LA – As a two-year starter at the University of Louisiana at Monroe (then known as Northeast Louisiana University) from 1989-1991, Carlos Funchess earned acclaim for his tomahawk dunks and contributions to some of the school's greatest teams. The 6-4 jumping jack was co-MVP in the Southland Conference as a senior, played on two consecutive NCAA Tournament teams and won the 1991 slam dunk national championship his senior year.

“He was so athletic,” said Keith Richard, then an assistant and now head coach at ULM. “Back then, the thing we had going was that we had athletic wings who could shoot. He really improved his shooting when he got here. He could run the floor and had the highlight dunks. He really started a phenomenon around here and it was entertaining to watch guys like him who were that athletic.”



Decades later, Funchess established himself as an outstanding women's basketball coach as well. In his first year as Southern's head coach, Funchess led the Jaguars to the 2018-19 SWAC regular season championship, the 2019 SWAC Tournament championship and a 2019 NCAA Tournament appearance. In the 2022-23 season, the Jaguars won their second SWAC Tournament title in four years under Funchess and made another appearance in the NCAA Tournament.

In recognition of his accomplishments as a player at ULM, Brooks will be inducted into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame during the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches' 50th Annual Awards Banquet on Saturday, May 4, at the Baton Rouge Marriott.

“It was a total shock and surprise to me, and also an honor to know that people do remember,” said Funchess, who just completed his fifth season as Southern’s head coach. “It’s been over 30 years ago and it’s hard to believe that it’s been that long. It’s great to be looked at as one of the best.”

Funchess embodied the type player who helped his collegiate coach Mike Vining win 401 games at ULM. Vining favored a team filled with “tweeners,” and Funchess was one of his best.

“I got him and let the other team figure out who could guard him,” Vining said. “If you put a three on him, we’d put him inside. If you tried to guard him with a four, we’d take him outside. We let them worry about it.”

While some schools bypassed Funchess as too small to play power forward and not skilled enough to play small forward, Vining saw an athlete capable of winning mismatches all over the court.

Said Funchess: “It’s what the game is today. He had the foresight to see that -- if you can play, we’ll put you on the court. They call it now, ‘positionless basketball.’”

Recruited out of Copiah-Lincoln Community College in Mississippi by former ULM assistant coach Tom Schuberth, Funchess arrived in Monroe, Louisiana, as the missing piece in a championship puzzle.

“They recruited Mississippi junior colleges a lot,” said Funchess, a product of Magee, Mississippi. “They had a couple of players I was familiar with and I had a great visit. Coach Vining was the type of coach that I wanted to play for, as well as Coach Richard and Coach Schuberth. I thought we had an opportunity to be really good.”

Indeed, Funchess made an immediate impact as he averaged 13.4 points and 6.6 rebounds and shot 46.8% behind the three-point line in his Division I debut, earning first team All-Southland Conference honors. ULM dominated the Southland Conference regular season at 13-1, claimed the SLC Tournament title in 1989-90 and played Purdue in the NCAA Tournament. ULM brought a 22-7 overall record into the NCAA postseason and led Purdue 34-33 at halftime before the Boilermakers surged to the 75-63 win.

“We could play with a lot of people,” Vining said. “We just couldn’t play with them for 40 minutes.”



The next season, ULM again finished first in the league and beat Texas-Arlington for another SLC Tournament championship. Funchess averaged 19.4 points and 5.8 rebounds and had a 55.1% field goal percentage and 42.7% three-point field goal percentage, while sharing SLC Player of the Year honors (with teammate Anthony Jones) and earning first team NABC All-District recognition.

The program completed its first undefeated home season with a 14-0 mark at Fant-Ewing Coliseum and increased their home winning streak to 25 games. ULM became the first SLC team to claim the regular season and conference tournament championships in back-to-back years.

“It was a fun time, a great time,” Richard said. “Carlos was such a good person; it was enjoyable to watch him all the way around.”

One of the most memorable contests of the era occurred when ULM beat Florida A&M 87-63 at Fant-Ewing Coliseum on March 6, 1991. An energized home crowd of 5,576 cheered ULM to victory in a nationally-televised NCAA Tournament play-in game called by Dick Vitale and Tim Brando. Funchess scored 15 points and had three blocked shots.

“We were hyped up and it was great publicity, not only for us but also for the university,” said Funchess, who tallied 1,044 points (16.6 avg.) and 388 rebounds (6.2 avg.) in two years. “The crowd was awesome, as usual. It was loud in there, a nationally-televised game. You had Tim Brando and the great Dick Vitale. That helped put us on the map.”

ULM earned the right to face Duke in the first round of the NAAs. The team hung tough for a half against a star-studded lineup featuring Christian Laettner, Bobby Hurley and Grant Hill at the Minneapolis Metrodome, before losing 102-73. The eventual national champs trailed the feisty 15-seed for the first 10 minutes and only led by six points at halftime, causing coach Mike Krzyzewski to knock over a chalkboard in the locker room, according to Sports Illustrated.

“We played a great first half but struggled in the second half and lost the game to a great team,” said Funchess, who scored 19 points in defeat.

Although his ULM playing career ended with the loss, Funchess had another opportunity to showcase his sky-walking ability on ESPN in a slam dunk contest at the Final Four. Funchess was a late add to the contest and ended up outlasting ULM teammate Anthony “Greyhound” Jones.

“Greyhound and I made the finals,” Funchess said. “It was almost like being back at practice dunking against each other and having fun. Fortunately for me, I won but it was great and made for some long-lasting memories.”

From an Associated Press account of his spectacular performance:

“Move over, Michael Jordan. Carlos Funchess, a Northeast Louisiana basketball player, put on a midair display Sunday rivaling that of the Chicago Bulls star to win a slam dunk contest held in conjunction with the NCAA Final Four. On his two attempts in the final against teammate Anthony Jones, Funchess bounced the ball off the backboard and slammed it in on his first attempt and followed with his 360-degree dunk to the cheers of 10,000 fans at Market Square Arena.”

Beyond the headlines and highlights, Funchess still savors the camaraderie of competing with his teammates and coaches. Decades later, he remains close to most of them.

“The people in Monroe, from the coaches, the training staff, it’s like family when we see each other,” Funchess said. “I always keep up with them. I was up there so long; it was like home to me.”

After being named the North MVP of the Louisiana College All-Star Game following his senior season, Funchess played professional basketball for a few years, including a brief stint with the NBA’s Miami Heat. His playing career took him through the Global Basketball Association, the U.S. Basketball League, the Continental Basketball League and overseas in Venezuela.

Funchess came back to ULM as a men's assistant under Vining in 1994. He then shifted gears working as Coordinator of Student-Athlete Services before returning to the bench in 2003 as a ULM women's basketball assistant for former head coach Mona Martin.

“His parents were teachers too,” Vining said. “He came back here and he liked it. He just decided coaching is what he wanted to do.”

Funchess gained an appreciation for the women’s game while assisting the Monroe Magic, a talented north Louisiana AAU squad coached by legendary former ULM coach Linda Harper. Ultimately, it’s how he found his true calling.

“That’s probably been the best move of my career,” Funchess said of joining Martin’s ULM staff. “I was there for two years and we won the Southland Conference championship my last year and we got beat in the finals.”

Hired by Sandy Pugh as an assistant at Southern in 2005, Funchess has enjoyed a long, successful second act in the game.

“She had been trying to get me for three or four years to come coach for her,” Funchess said. “I came down and made a visit and really liked it. I was her assistant for 13 years before taking over as head coach here at Southern. That’s been my journey into women’s basketball.”

Whether rattling rims or mentoring young players, success is a common theme for Funchess.

“One thing I always wanted to do is give it 100 percent,” Funchess said. “Everything just fell like it has so far. Basketball has been great to me.”

In addition to the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame induction, the May 4 awards banquet will include recognition of Louisiana’s major college, small college, junior college and high school players and coaches of the year, the top pro player from the state, as well as the presentation of the LABC’s Mr. Louisiana Basketball award to former long-time Scotlandville Magnet High School coach Carlos Sample and the presentation of the LABC’s Don Landry Award to former long-time Northwestern State University coach and athletic director Tynes Hildebrand.

The Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame is sponsored by the LABC. The Hall of Fame was created in 1975 to honor former great basketball players and coaches from Louisiana colleges. More information about the LABC and the Hall of Fame can be obtained by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

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