

GERALD HEBERT

*Note: This is the **second** in a series of two articles on this year's inductee into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award recipient. The 2011 inductee will be former LSU star player Kenny Higgs. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2011 is the long-time coordinator of the LHSAA Top 28 state basketball tournament in Lafayette, Gerald Hebert.*

BASEBALL GUY REAPS TOP LOUISIANA BASKETBALL HONOR

By: Kevin Foote
Lafayette Daily Advertiser
Written for the LABC

LAFAYETTE, LA -- Gerald Hebert did actually play basketball during his high school athletic career at Abbeville High in the early 1960s.

For the record, he described his participation on the hardwood as merely "taking up space."

It was on the baseball field that Hebert shined as an athlete. He was a two-time All-State pitcher at Abbeville High, played two years of college baseball at then-USL and later followed that with six years of minor league baseball in the New York Mets organization.



Hebert got the attention of the Mets by once throwing four consecutive weekend shutouts in a semi-pro league.

After his professional playing days were over, Hebert was a player-coach on a summer wooden bat league that finished third in the nation.

"We didn't really know who he was at the time, but we beat Roger Clemens 2-1 (in a regional tournament)," Hebert said.

In other words, Gerald Hebert is a baseball man.

So imagine Hebert's surprise when he got a call from a representative of the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches telling him that he had been selected as the winner of the 2011 "Mr. Louisiana Basketball" award.

"My first thought was that they made a mistake," Hebert said. "To be honest, I thought it was a high school coaches association at first. When I realized it was a college coaches association, I tried to talk them out of it."

For Hebert, it was just hard to imagine winning the same award as the likes of Joe Dean, Bob Pettit, Beryl Shipley, Leon Barmore, Dale Brown and Scotty Robertson.

"For me, it's kind of embarrassing when you look at names like that," he said.

While Hebert's baseball background may not fit in with those Hall of Fame basketball names, the award is given annually to someone "who has made a significant, long-term contribution to the game of basketball at any level in the state of Louisiana."

With that as the criteria, it's hard to argue with the selection.

For the past 15 years, Hebert has been the tournament director for the LHSAA Top 28 boy's basketball state tournament at the Cajundome in Lafayette.

Under Hebert's leadership, the 50-year-old Top 28 Tournament reached new heights in attendance, community participation, atmosphere and hospitality for the players, coaches and fans.

More fittingly, another past winner of this award was Orvis Sigler, the father of the Top 28 Tournament concept. Hebert could be the father of the rebirth of the tournament.

"It was everything in a tournament that we had ever hoped for," former LHSAA commissioner Tommy Henry said. "So often in these tournaments, it was 'Here's the key to the arena, turn off the lights when you're done.' With Gerald, he's there the whole time making it happen. He got the whole community involved. For us, it was a dream come true really."

When Hebert took over the Top 28, there had never been a week-long attendance figure above 49,000. By the time the tournament left for Shreveport after the 2011 season, it had gotten over 69,000.

In fact, 12 of the 16 most attended Top 28 tournaments in the event's 50 years occurred since the Cajundome took over in 1997.

It was more than just crowd figures, though. The Cajundome era brought an NBA-style environment with laser light shows, halftime exhibitions and fan-friendly contests. It also brought school-friendly accommodations with hotels, food and a check.

"I don't accept this for myself," Hebert said. "I accept it for all the Blue Coats (volunteers), for all the restaurant owners around the area who provided food for 15 years, for Greg Davis and the Cajundome, for all the businesses that sponsored every game and for the City of Lafayette."

The truth is, though, that the entire idea was all Gerald Hebert.

As the story goes, Hebert was attending a Top 28 Tournament in Baton Rouge with Danny and Rickey Broussard. During the conversation, the question was asked about the experience of playing at the Pete Maravich Assembly Center.

Danny Broussard promptly explained that each school loses money.

"He told me that the schools pay for everything and that they got nothing and actually lose money for making the Top 28," Hebert said. "I couldn't believe it. I just asked him if he was kidding."

At that point, Hebert asked the Broussards what they thought about moving the tournament to the Cajundome.

"They just laughed at me," Hebert said. "I took it as a challenge."

A year later, the Top 28 moved to the Cajundome.

"I first got to know Gerald when he helped save the All-Star baseball games for us by moving it to Abbeville," Henry said. "Then he put on two of the most successful Hall of Fame games we've ever had. I've told Gerald before he could put on a major Mardi Gras parade in a phone booth."

The idea of improving events, however, wasn't new to Hebert. In the previous decade, Hebert had spearheaded UL-Lafayette baseball games being played in his hometown of Abbeville to provide revenue to refurbish youth ball parks.

Hebert also brought the state baseball All-Star Games to Abbeville, where he added such extras as skydivers, fireworks shows, Shaquille O'Neal being dropped down in centerfield and home run hitting contests.

Even before that, Hebert began an association with the LHSAA by hosting a Great Eight benefit high school basketball event.

"We've had a lot of good tournaments over the years, but none of them have been as consistently good as the Top 28 at the Cajundome, and it's all because of Gerald's leadership. He's very deserving of this award."

The Mr. Louisiana Basketball award will be presented to Hebert during the LABC's 37th Annual Awards Banquet on May 7 at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge. The banquet is sponsored by SportsCare, the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic and Chesapeake Energy Corporation.

In addition to honoring Hebert, the banquet will include the induction of one new member into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame. There will also be recognition of Louisiana's major

college, small college, junior college and high school players and coaches of the year, along with the top pro player from the state.

A limited number of tickets for the banquet are available for \$25 and can be reserved by contacting the LABC at labball@gmail.com. More information about the LABC can be obtained by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

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