

MIKE MCCONATHY

*Note: This is the **second** in a series of two feature stories on this year's inductee into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and this year's recipient of the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award. The 2023 inductee will be former UL-Lafayette star Kevin Brooks. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2023 is former long-time Northwestern St. coach Mike McConathy.*

MIKE MCCONATHY'S LIFELONG IMPACT ON LOUISIANA GOES BEYOND BASKETBALL, BUT IT'S ROOTED IN HOOPS

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NATCHITOCHEs, LA – It's impossible to envision anyone fitting the title of "Mr. Louisiana Basketball" any better than the 2023 recipient, Mike McConathy

From his family roots to his high school and college playing career, to his more than 40 years coaching the game at the high school, junior college and NCAA Division I levels, his entire basketball story is as Louisiana as the red clay hills on the McConathy family homestead in Bienville Parish, and the bayous and levees in the southern part of the state.



McConathy will receive the Mr. Louisiana Basketball award during the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches' 49th Annual Awards Banquet this Saturday, May 6, at the Baton Rouge Marriott. It is the most prestigious annual award given by the LABC and is presented annually to someone who has made a significant, long-term contribution to the game of basketball at any level in the State of Louisiana. The banquet is sponsored by the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic and Universal Coin & Bullion, Ltd.

It's not unreasonable to suggest that in his 39 years coaching college basketball – the first 16 starting a Bossier Parish Community College program from scratch and building a junior college powerhouse, the next 23 returning a long-struggling program to national prominence at Northwestern State, his father's alma mater – there are aren't many state highways that McConathy hasn't driven as he searched for players and built relationships with high school coaches, administrators and community leaders.

One colleague said he may have been happiest with a steering wheel in his hands, driving on roads where the tree tops touch over the center line, heading for a nearby gym or a far-away game, or on the way to a home visit with a prospect, and frequently, hustling to a wedding or a funeral, because those are priorities in McConathy's family-values, Christian-centered mindset.

However, McConathy isn't being honored by the LABC for his travel log. It's his credentials in the game, and the respect he's earned along the way, that bring him into this spotlight.

It's not simply that he is the winningest college basketball coach in state history, in the men's or women's game, with 682 victories in 39 seasons. It could be, but there's much more.



He is already in the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame for his exploits as a player, just like his father, Johnny, and his uncle, George. They starred for Northwestern State in the decade after World War II. His daddy was the Number 5 pick in the 1951 NBA Draft and his number 14 jersey is retired and hanging in Prather Coliseum at Northwestern State.

McConathy was named one of the top 100 prep players in the nation after a spectacular three seasons at Airline High in Bossier City, averaging 28 points per game as a senior. He went on to play at Louisiana Tech (1973-77), where he was a two-time honorable mention All-American and finished as the school's second leading career scorer with 2,033 points for a 20.7 average. In 1976, he earned Southland Conference Player of the Year honors when he led the Bulldogs to the conference championship, then going in Round 4 of the 1977 NBA Draft following a 27.5 scoring average as a senior.

After being told he would make his NBA team, then getting cut on the last round, he briefly went to play in Europe but abandoned that to begin his teaching and coaching career, back at Airline High, starting the Lady Vikings' basketball program.

In 1983, Bossier Parish Community College hired him to start a men's team. There was no gym, barely a budget. After 41 wins in his first three seasons, the fourth year netted 24, and from there, 10 of the next 12 included 22 W's or more, totaling 352 against just 159 losses in 16 years. His teams were nationally-ranked and twice reached the junior college national tournament.

Then, after getting passed over for NCAA Division I head coaching posts at six different schools, he was finally the pick to take over the Northwestern State Demons' downtrodden program in March 1999. There had been only five winning seasons in 24 years of Division I membership. Northwestern State had never been in a conference championship game at that level and hadn't sniffed the NCAA Tournament.

He didn't gut the roster and bring in a horde of junior college players. He added a couple, gradually sold the players on his approach, and led that first team to 17 wins and the Southland Conference Tournament finals. A year later, they were back in the conference tournament title game, in his hometown of Bossier City, and edged top-seeded McNeese State to reach the NCAA Tournament.



It was the first of three NCAA Tournament trips for the Demons, who won a pair of games in March Madness – the first-ever opening round game, over Winthrop, in 2001, and a stunning last-second comeback over third-seeded Iowa, the Big Ten Conference Tournament champion, in 2006. All told, McConathy's Demons won 330 games and two Southland Conference regular season championships, played in seven Southland Conference Tournament championship games (winning three), while notching regular-season road wins over Mississippi State, Auburn, Oklahoma State, and Oregon State and raising about \$4 million in guarantee money for the general athletic budget by going against Power 5 foes over 100 times. McConathy was a three-time Southland Conference Coach of the Year, as well as a two-time Louisiana Major College Coach of the Year.

That's a Cliff's Notes version of McConathy's basketball resume. It barely scratches the surface of why he personifies the "Mr. Louisiana Basketball" award.

In his 23 seasons at Northwestern State, almost 90 percent of his players earned diplomas, while the graduation rate around NCAA Division I hoops hovered around half that number. Northwestern State drew commendation from the NCAA for ranking among the nation's top 10 percent in the Academic Progress Rate report.

Community service was a cornerstone of McConathy's Demons. One initiative, an educational program with area junior high schools, brought him into the National Association of Basketball Coaches' ring of honor when he received the 2012 Pillar of the Game Award for

Education at the Final Four in New Orleans – chosen over nominees from every level of college basketball.

He was also a leader in the LABC, serving terms as an officer, and as a ringleader for years of a coaching clinic in Baton Rouge on the day of the LABC's annual awards banquet. For 15 years, McConathy was a voter on the USA Today coaches' Top 25 poll, and his ballot was late only once – after a return flight from a game in Hawaii.



Servant-leadership continues to be a core principle in his life, including decades of involvement with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Remember his love of driving? Ask members of various Bossier Parish CC sports teams about him driving not only the basketball team bus, but also buses and vans for tennis, baseball and softball during his 16 years there.

A few years ago, Northwestern State's cross country team had no professional driver to get the runners to a meet at Nacogdoches, Texas. "Coach Mike" found out, went to renew his Commercial Drivers' License, discovered a physical exam was required, and got that done just in time to get the CDL so he could get the team on the road.

"What other Division I head coach, any sport, does that?" said Demons' track and field coach Mike Heimerman.

"Nobody. Just Coach Mike," said associate head track coach Adam Pennington. "That's just him."

McConathy was something of a unicorn around the Northwestern State campus, seen wielding a weed eater to trim grass, sometimes around Prather Coliseum before women's basketball recruits were arriving during a holiday when the grounds crew was off. If it wasn't a weed eater, it might be a power washer, or a paint brush, and it wasn't limited to athletics facilities or grounds and it happened again and again, winter, summer, spring and fall.

"Coach Mike saw a need, and next thing we knew, we were following his lead and headed out to do whatever we could to make something better," said longtime assistant coach Jeff Moore, now at LSU. "Not for recognition, but just because it was the right thing to do. Talk about teaching life lessons to his staff and players, and leading by example, that's Mike McConathy."

At too many NCAA Division I schools, there's not much of a relationship between the men's and women's basketball programs, although almost always, they share facilities and must collaborate on schedules and practice times.

“From the day we arrived in Natchitoches, Coach Mike welcomed us with open arms and shared his time, wisdom and knowledge with nothing expected in return. He taught me so many valuable lessons about leading a program with integrity and developing relationships within the department and community,” said current Louisiana Tech women's coach Brooke Stoehr, who led the Lady Demons from 2012-16.



His decades of impact as a coach have overshadowed his beginnings as a player.

After averaging 28 points and being listed among the nation's Top 100 high school seniors, McConathy resisted the pitches of LSU's Dale Brown and his assistant, Homer Drew (later the iconic Valparaiso coach whose son, Scott, has won a national championship at Baylor); and among others, Oklahoma's John McLeod (later the Phoenix Suns' coach). The college choice came down close to home, to Louisiana Tech, coached by future NBA coach Scotty Robertson, and Northwestern State, led by Tynes Hildebrand. McConathy's grandmother's sweet tea in Bienville Parish swayed him to nearby Ruston.

Billy Grisham had a very close view of McConathy the player. He refereed many of McConathy's games in high school and college. The Shreveport native first saw McConathy play in junior high, and watched him work his way into a breakout star as a sophomore at Airline High. By then, McConathy was known as "Opie" since he had a head full of red hair, like Andy Griffith's TV son, played by Ron Howard in *Mayberry RFD*.

“He wasn't anything special until his sophomore year at Airline. From then on, he just grinned when he shot it, 'cause most of the time, it went in, like ole (Steph) Curry in the NBA,” said Grisham. “If they'd had a 3-point shot in his time, he would easily have averaged in the 30s. He was one of the most prolific scorers I ever saw, along with Lou Dunbar, Jackie Moreland, Cotton Nash and a very elite few.”

“He could shoot it, from way out and mid-range, and he could drive it. When he got to the free throw line, he was automatic. And he was a really fine point guard, but what a shooter! He could light up a scoreboard,” said Grisham. “You had to keep extra light bulbs around, because he’d burn ‘em out.”

At Louisiana Tech, two future college head coaches were teammates – Tim Floyd, who along with stints at New Orleans, Iowa State and UTEP, coached NBA teams in Chicago and New Orleans; and Jim Wooldridge, who coached at Texas State, Louisiana Tech, Kansas State and Cal-Riverside. They said “Opie” earned everything he accomplished.

“I’ve seen and coached a lot of athletes through the years, but even now, I can say Mike McConathy is the most dedicated athlete I have ever been around,” said Wooldridge. “He was unrelenting in his drive to improve. He would often wear ankle weights, and he was constantly jumping rope. After practice, many nights he would return to the gym and shoot and shoot and shoot.”

“He was completely self-made and his numbers each year reflected how hard he was working,” said Floyd. “He could have started for North Carolina, UCLA or anybody else.”

That work ethic has remained constant. Since he left coaching in March 2022, he’s still up before dawn and on the road, visiting friends and making new ones, finding ways to be of service. He’s taken a timeout from hoops, but for his friends in college basketball, he left an indelible impression.

“He’s the Lone Ranger in a lot of ways,” said LSU’s legendary Brown. “He followed every rule. Two, he knows the game very well. Mike loves kids. He gave my grandson a break. Peyton is indebted to him. If you were going to send a son someplace to learn the game and learn lessons about life, you sent him to Mike McConathy.”

Texas A&M coach Buzz Williams got his first full-time coaching job on McConathy’s first Northwestern State staff, and it changed his life.

“In my career in college athletics, I am not sure if there’s ever been a better example of a leader on and off the floor than Coach Mike. Wherever he coached, his name is attached to every record there is, but what isn’t quantifiable is the impact he has made to all of those who were part of his program, regardless of their position. His impact has changed thousands and thousands of lives for the better, including mine.”

“Generally players don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. Mike had that down really well,” said Brown.

“His record-setting career will be what many recognize,” said Stoehr, “but the legacy he has left and the lives he’s touched through the years will go on to impact generations.”

In addition to honoring McConathy, the May 6 awards banquet will include the induction of former University of Louisiana at Lafayette star Kevin Brooks 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. More information about the LABC can be obtained by visiting their website at www.labball.com.

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