

LEONARD MITCHELL

*Note: This is the **first** in a series of three articles on this year's inductees into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame. The 2000 inductees include Leonard Mitchell, G. O. Wright and Tommy Canterbury.*

FORMER LSU STAR LEONARD MITCHELL TO BE INDUCTED INTO LOUISIANA BASKETBALL HALL OF FAME

By: Sam King
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BATON ROUGE --- This writer's first glimpse of future LSU basketball star Leonard Mitchell came in the tiny confines of the St. Martinville High School gym in February of 1980.

What this high school senior could do on a basketball court, others only dreamed of doing.

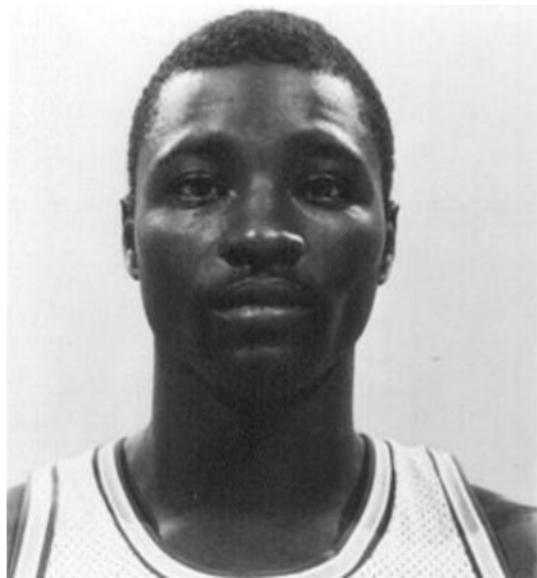
Lean and sleek, the 6-7 Mitchell had the quickness of a cat, amazing speed and his shockingly, quick leap was astounding as he earned Mr. Basketball recognition as a senior at St. Martinville.

As he time-and-again blocked shots by opponents, it was obvious why he had already earned the nickname of "Swat." It's a name that stayed with him through his glory years at LSU where he became the only player ever to lead the Tigers in blocked shots for four straight years.

College scouts from throughout the nation came to watch Mitchell and drooled over his potential. Certainly, he would be a star in college and maybe even better in the pro ranks.

Injuries, however, would put a damper on the great expectations for Mitchell, although he was said to be lucky not to be killed in an auto accident before enrolling at LSU. Mitchell suffered only cuts and a sore back while riding in a Corvette that was totaled.

There were busted ankles and strained muscles, but no injury nearly as severe as the one suffered in the spring prior to his junior year. He and a brother wrestled at home with Mitchell falling on a basketball trophy and severing the ulna nerve which controlled the grip on his shooting hand.



Doctors said he probably wouldn't play again.

Wrong again.

He was named All-Southeastern Conference for the second straight season, despite the severed ulna limiting the flexibility of his shooting hand.

Mitchell's senior season was marred by a dislocated shoulder, which led to post-season surgery and forced him to miss the Olympic trials and several pro scouting camps. He was only the 60th pick in the third round of the NBA Draft by the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Mitchell did arrive at LSU at just the right time, earning a starting job at forward on LSU's 1981 Final Four team. That season he was named Louisiana Newcomer of the Year. He then earned All-SEC and All-Louisiana recognition in his sophomore and junior seasons and finished his career as LSU's No. 6 all-time leading scorer (1,508 points, 12.8 ppg) and the Tigers' No. 4 all-time rebounder (922 rebounds, 7.8 rpg). Mitchell became the first and only player to lead LSU in blocked shots four straight years.

As a senior plagued by injuries, Mitchell showed an 11.9 scoring average and 7.3 rebounds per game, again earning All-Louisiana honors. As a junior he averaged 14.7 points and 9.1 rebounds, as a sophomore he showed 14.0 points and 7.6 rebounds per game and on the Final Four team in 1981, he averaged 10.8 points and 7.2 rebounds.

Mitchell will be honored for his great achievements when he will be inducted into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame on July 20 in Baton Rouge. Joining Mitchell in this year's induction class are former Xavier coach G. O. Wright and ex-Centenary coach Tommy Canterbury.

Of his selection for the Hall of Fame, Mitchell said, "It is a privilege. Not too many people get inducted into the Hall of Fame."

Mitchell, who works as a security guard at the Mall of Louisiana in Baton Rouge, still has a great love for basketball.

"I love to play basketball. I would still be playing if it wasn't for my injuries," said Mitchell. "I got hurt and had to move on to other things."

"Playing high school, college and professional (foreign) basketball was a great experience. I wish I could have done it more."

Although Mitchell didn't make it in the NBA, he saw the world, courtesy of his basketball skills.

Mitchell played 12 months-a-year for almost 10 years. He would finish a season in one country, come home a couple of weeks and head to another country. Mitchell said he played in France a couple of stints as well as seasons in Australia, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, Belgium, Argentina, Santa Domingo and Venezuela.

Playing foreign basketball isn't a bad deal for Americans, who get tax-free salaries, furnished apartments, a car and bonuses for each game won.

"Everything is score and win," Mitchell once told reporters. "You win, everything is peaches and cream. If you lose, the American gets blamed for it - no matter what."

"I don't think I ever had a player that ran the court like Leonard," said former Tiger coach Dale Brown. "A black panther - that's what he looked like running and moving."

"Had he not had those two injuries, he was destined to be an outstanding NBA player," said Brown. "There was no doubt about that. He could shoot from the outside. He could put it down. He could rebound. He was strong."

"Someone should bronze his name for all the injuries he has overcome," Brown said at the end of Mitchell's career.

He notes, "Leonard was one of the most uncomplicated players I ever dealt with in my life. He had no agenda. Leonard is who he is."

The Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame, located in LSU's Pete Maravich Assembly Center, is sponsored by the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches. The LABC's 26th Annual Hall of Fame Awards Luncheon, sponsored by SportsCare, will be held at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge at noon on July 20.

In addition to the induction of the new Hall of Fame members, the luncheon will include recognition of Louisiana's college, junior college and high school players and coaches of the year, the top pro player from the state and the announcement of the recipient of the prestigious Mr. Louisiana Basketball award.

Tickets for the luncheon are \$15 and can be obtained by contacting the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge. The Embassy Suites Hotel is located at 4914 Constitution Avenue in Baton Rouge (exit 158 off Interstate 10).