

MIKE VINING

*Note: This is the **fourth** in a series of four articles on this year's inductees into the Louisiana Basketball Hall of Fame and the LABC's Mr. Louisiana Basketball award recipient. The 2006 inductees will be former star players Larry Wright of Grambling St., Gerard King of Nicholls St. and Jerald Honeycutt of Tulane. Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2006 is former UL-Monroe coach Mike Vining.*

FORMER UL-MONROE COACH MIKE VINING TO BE HONORED AS "MR. LOUISIANA BASKETBALL"

By: Paul J. Letlow
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Written for the LABC

MONROE, LA -- Louisiana-Monroe basketball coach Mike Vining sat on the eve of a milestone victory in 1999, but all he could he could talk about that day at practice was his college coach — the late Lenny Fant.

At that time, Vining was one victory short of 326, a number that would tie him with his college coach and mentor at ULM.

Sitting around joking with his friends that afternoon before practice, Vining kept steering the conversation back to Coach Fant.

"He's responsible for all of it," said Vining, who learned his trade as a player, a graduate assistant and an assistant coach under Fant. "He's responsible for his and mine too."

That was vintage Vining.

Vining was always eager to give credit to others during a long and successful run as ULM's basketball coach. His mentor, his players, his assistant coaches all played a role in Vining's legacy.

"He led with class, no scandals and was committed to this job," said Monroe Mayor Jamie Mayo, who played for Vining at Bastrop High School and then at ULM. "It was the only job he's ever wanted. He's one of my best friends now."

For those reasons and more, Vining has been chosen as "Mr. Louisiana Basketball" for 2006. The Mr. Louisiana Basketball award is given annually by the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches to someone who has made a significant contribution to the game of basketball at any level in the State of Louisiana.



Modest and quick with a quip, Vining rode herd over the ULM basketball program for more than two decades. ULM basketball reached new heights with the popular coach on the sidelines. Vining carried on the tradition of excellence that Fant instilled during his long reign at ULM.

In 24 seasons, Vining won 401 games (4th most in state history) and led ULM to seven Southland Conference regular season championships, seven conference tournament championships, seven NCAA Division I tournaments and one NIT appearance. Vining was a four-time SLC Coach of the Year, two-time Louisiana Coach of the Year and once the NABC District Coach of the Year.

Vining posted six 20-win seasons and retired from ULM in 2005 as the winningest coach in school and SLC history, with a 57 percent career winning percentage.

It was all a labor of love. Vining was a homeboy who never wanted to leave the northeastern Louisiana area where he grew up.

"It's not going to be the same," ULM supporter Buddy Embanato said. "He could have gone anywhere he wanted to. He had several offers from bigger schools, but he loves the school and the people. Being happy at what you do is just as important as how much money you make."

A native of Goodwill in West Carroll Parish, Vining played on three district championship basketball teams at Forest High. After playing both baseball and basketball at ULM under Fant, he served in the U.S. Army for three years before beginning his coaching career in 1971 at Bastrop High.

He led Bastrop to a 175-47 record, six state playoff appearances and one state championship during his seven seasons. His 1975 championship team (led by future ULM and NBA star Calvin Natt) finished the season with a 35-1 record, earning Vining state Class AAAA Coach of the Year honors.

In 1978, Vining returned to ULM as an assistant coach for three seasons (under Fant and Benny Hollis), before becoming head coach in 1981. He is a former President of the LABC and coached in four LABC All-Star games. In 2005 he was inducted into the SLC Hall of Honor.

Even on that bittersweet day in 2005 when he retired from coaching, Vining kept the audience rolling with his trademark humor. An avid outdoorsman who works with cutting horses, he donned a cowboy hat to a round of laughs.

Wearing a tan jacket and maroon dress shirt with no tie, Vining stood behind a table decorated with many of the trophies won during his career. Scanning the standing-room-only crowd, Vining quipped, "I didn't know this many people could take a three-hour lunch break. But I do appreciate you being here."

ULM fans appreciated Vining's long, successful tour of duty as well.

The Mr. Louisiana Basketball award will be presented to Vining during the LABC's 32nd Annual Awards Banquet at the Holiday Inn Select in Baton Rouge on May 6. The banquet is sponsored by SportsCare.

In addition to the honoring of Vining, the banquet will include the induction of three new members 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 \$20 and can be reserved by contacting the LABC at labbal@gmail.com. The Holiday Inn Select is located at 4728 Constitution Avenue in Baton Rouge (College Drive exit off of Interstate 10).

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