

MARK WHITEHEAD

*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 2017 inductee will be former LSU star John Williams (1984-86). Mr. Louisiana Basketball for 2017 is former long-time college basketball official Mark Whitehead.*

DRIVEN BY LOVE FOR BASKETBALL, WHITEHEAD GOT EARLY START ON FOUR-DECADE OFFICIATING CAREER

By: Sheldon Mickles
Baton Rouge *Advocate*
Written for the LABC

DENHAM SPRINGS, LA – When he began playing Biddy basketball nearly 50 years ago, Mark Whitehead never knew -- or could even dream about -- where the game he loved so much would eventually take him.

The answer would come soon enough, though.

In fact, it came when he was old enough to get his driver's license while still a student and varsity basketball player at Denham Springs High School.

Even then, becoming an on-court official was merely a way for Whitehead to earn some money to pay for his tuition at Southeastern Louisiana University, where he received a marketing degree.



In time it became much, much more for Whitehead, who'll celebrate his 57th birthday a couple of weeks after receiving the 2017 Mr. Louisiana Basketball award from the Louisiana Association of Basketball Coaches on May 13. He will receive the award during the LABC's 43rd Awards Banquet at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Baton Rouge. The banquet is sponsored by the Baton Rouge Orthopaedic Clinic.

The state's college basketball coaches bestow the annual award upon someone "who has made a significant, long-term contribution to the game of basketball at any level in the state of Louisiana."

Whitehead certainly fills the bill after officiating for 40 years -- 29 at the NCAA Division I level -- before hanging up his whistle and stepping off the court last summer to become coordinator of officials for the Southeastern Conference and three other leagues.

His contributions as a Division I official alone are mind-boggling.

He worked close to 2,000 games and officiated in 23 NCAA tournaments -- including 18 regional semifinals and finals with five Final Four assignments.

The highlight of his career came when he served as lead official for the 2012 title game between Kentucky and Kansas in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans, tossing the ball in the air for the opening tip in his home state.

“I never could dream that big, I never thought of it that way,” Whitehead said of his career in an interview with the Baton Rouge *Advocate* last October. “I was just trying to make \$10 to help pay my college tuition back in 1978, so I never dreamed of that.”

One thing led to another, however, and Whitehead soon began a distinguished career that took him all over the country for upwards of 100 games a season -- calling games at one time or another in the SEC, Big 12, Big Ten, Conference USA, American Athletic, Pac-12, Mountain West and Missouri Valley.

“To have what it became,” he said, “all the travel and the NCAA tournaments ... being a part of a great game with these coaches and kids, and feel like you were giving something back to the game, I never dreamed that big.”

“Really, I didn’t have any aspirations to do it for a living,” he reiterated. “I was doing it for fun after I graduated high school, and it just sort of developed from there. I started going to camps and things just happened. I liked it and people took a liking to me, and I got fortunate and lucky.”

Whitehead also dabbled in umpiring and did some football officiating early on, but eventually leaned more to basketball because, he said, of the high-paced action.

“You’re a lot more involved,” he said. “Plus, it’s indoors and the weather is a lot nicer. So I think I made a great choice.”

Whitehead chuckled at one of his earliest memories as a basketball official, when he called a Bidy game in which one of the young players -- Ben McDonald -- was taller than he was as a high-schooler.

Even after leaving the court, Whitehead is striving to make the game better.

Among the duties in his new position are assigning officials, watching live games, reviewing lots and lots of film, getting input from evaluators, and making decisions on people’s ability with a goal of helping them get better and improve.

All that is done with one thing in mind: Making the game more consistent so that it looks the same all across the country when fans are watching on TV.

“We’re trying to get one mindset, actually, across the entire country in officiating,” he said. “The NCAA is working on that, trying to make sure the games look the same -- and are played the same -- on the East Coast as they are in the Midwest and on the West Coast.”

Whitehead’s selection as Mr. Louisiana Basketball brings his career full circle, especially when he looks at the list of previous winners -- starting with Joe Dean in 1975 and Hall of Famer Bob Pettit a year later.

“I’m pretty much speechless and humbled when you look at the names of those people on that list,” he said. “There are a lot of people who made a name for themselves in this state: Starting with Mr. Dean and Bob Pettit, Tynes Hildebrand, Dale Brown, Mike Vining.”

Two others are particularly close to Whitehead -- Alton Leggette, who was a long-time coach at Denham Springs High, and Lafayette’s Gerald Boudreaux, a former Division I official whom Whitehead worked with on the court.

“I have some special relationships with quite a few guys on that list,” Whitehead said. “To be thought of and be involved with that group of men is very humbling and amazing to me.”

In addition to honoring Whitehead, the May 13 awards banquet will include the induction of former LSU star John Williams 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.

May 8, 2017