

Recently Passed West Has Basketball Ties To Ohio State



Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Famer and 12-time All-NBA point guard Jerry West died peacefully at the age of 86 on Wednesday – a basketball legend who had connections to Ohio State.

West played four years at West Virginia from 1957-60, never against the Buckeyes, but the two teams together possessed three of the best players to ever play the game – John Havlicek (Ohio State, 1959-62), Jerry Lucas (Ohio State, 1959-62) and West – according to Lee Caryer, an Ohio State basketball historian.

The trio share a rich history, Caryer said, as Lucas and West won gold medals together in the 1960 Olympics, and West and Havlicek were competitive when West’s Los Angeles Lakers and Havlicek’s Boston Celtics faced off on the hardwood.

“They (West and Havlicek) always played harder than the devil, but they were always fair and there was never any cheating, everything was within the rules, but they had an enormous respect for each other,” Caryer said.

Before the three were drafted, though, there was competition to be the best team in college basketball. Both the Buckeyes and Mountaineers had the talent, but when West Virginia and West had the opportunity to solidify the title in 1959, California ripped it away 71-70.

However the following year, Lucas and Havlicek had their opportunity to earn Ohio State its first-ever national championship and the No. 1 spot. In the regional semifinals of the 1960 NCAA men’s basketball tournament, West Virginia was defeated by NYU, while the Buckeyes went on to the finals – against California. By a 75-55 score, the Buckeyes became champions, while West never clinched the honor in his university days.

In the same year, West and Lucas were selected to play as part of the 1960 United States Men’s

National Basketball Olympic Team. Though the two were something like rivals in college, their connection on the court was easy to spot, Caryer said, and the team was dominant.

“They obviously had a good chemistry,” Caryer said. “They really played well — what we say on TV was, it was just like mens and boys.”

Lucas averaged 17.0 points per game, while West averaged 13.8, according to Sports Reference.

After the Olympics concluded and West and Lucas became world champions, West took his place on the Los Angeles Lakers as a shooting guard, where he was picked second overall in the 1960 NBA draft.

Lucas and Havlicek were then taken sixth and seventh overall, respectively, in the 1962 draft. Lucas was selected by the Cincinnati Royals, while Havlicek became a Boston Celtic — the Lakers biggest rival in the East throughout the 1960s — West and Havlicek became true rivals.

Across the 12-season span in which West and Havlicek played for the Lakers and Celtics, the teams faced off against each other six times in the NBA finals with Boston claiming each title, the last time in that time frame being 1969, a rare year where a member of the losing team was awarded the Most Valuable Player award — that being West.

Caryer said Havlicek didn't guard West specifically as Boston moved him all over the field because of his quickness, but when the pressure was high, it was the Buckeye versus the Mountaineer.

In 1972, the Lakers went on to claim the franchise's first NBA title, West's first and only as a player.

West went on to coach the Lakers from 1976-79 before spending over four decades as an executive for the Los Angeles Lakers (1979-2000), Memphis Grizzlies (2002-07), Golden State Warriors (2011-17) and the Los Angeles Clippers (2017-24).

Due to West's reputation and legacy in the NBA, Caryer suspects his fans will grieve the loss similar to how he and other Ohio State fanatics mourned the 2019 death of Havlicek.

“West hasn't sunk in yet,” Caryer said. “There are a lot of fans who feel the same way about West that Buckeye fans feel about Havlicek, and they were great competitors.”