

Lute Olson: From Small Town Roots to the Hall of Fame

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LONG BEACH – He was born more than 90 years ago in Mayville, North Dakota – a small town then and not much bigger now, with a population of 1,854 during the 2020 census. And he died in Tucson, Arizona just more than five years ago.

But during his lifetime, Robert Luther Olson became one of the most successful and celebrated college basketball coaches in history, during nine seasons at the University of Iowa and in Tucson with the University of Arizona. But, well before he took the Iowa Hawkeyes to the 1980 Final Four, and led the UA Wildcats to the 1997 national championship, the most recent western-based program to win an NCAA D-I title, Olson grew firm coaching roots in Southern California. And none were deeper for Lute – yeah, when it comes to hoops, there is only one *Lute* – than in Long Beach. Olson and his family had spent more than seven years in Huntington Beach, where they moved, first for coaching jobs at Western High in Anaheim, then Loara in the same city, before being hired as the first coach at Marina High in Huntington Beach. It was in his third of five seasons as the coach at Long Beach City College that the Vikings won the California State Community championship. And two years later he changed jobs, traveling five miles south to Long Beach State when Jerry Tarkanian left for UNLV.

It was in that first of 35 seasons as an NCAA head coach – and his only with the 49ers before being lured back to the Midwest and the University of Iowa – that Olson led maybe the best college team that never got to play in the NCAA tournament. The 49ers were placed on a three-year tournament ban because of alleged recruiting violations committed by Tarkanian and his staff during their five years at LBSU. But with the Tarkanian-recruited players that remained with the program, and the ones Olson added, that one season was memorable, indeed. “It was the most talented team I ever coached, by far,” Olson told me, and others, multiple times, even in the final decade of his life. Even as a still-naïve basketball follower and reporter of age 18 – I was a freshman at LBSU when Olson was the coach, when he became one of my many “basketball mentors” – I would agree, especially with 50 years of hindsight. The team was 24-2, with the only losses coming by two points apiece at the University of Colorado (led by future 13-year NBA forward Scotty Wedman and nine-year NFL receiver Dave Logan) and Marquette (which, coached by the late Al McGuire and led by future NBA players Maurice Lucas, Earl Tatum and Bo Ellis, lost in the NCAA title game to David Thompson and North Carolina State a few months later. Five of those 49ers were eventually NBA draft picks, including two who played for NBA champions (Glenn McDonald with Boston in 1976 and Bob Gross with Portland the following season).

He closed his coaching career with a 781-280 record, and a roster of “Coach O alumni” to rival that of any other high-powered program in history, including guys still active coaches today, including Steve Kerr (Golden State),

Damon Stoudamire (Georgia Tech), Josh Pastner (UNLV) and Mike Bibby (Sacramento State). But for all those years since he “left” Southern California in the spring of 1974 and all the wins, championships and Hall of Fame inductions, Olson cherished nourishing those SoCal “roots” as frequently as possible. It remained one of frequent recruiting stops, landing key members of his teams such as Ricky Anderson (whose father, Gary, he coached at LBCC), Jud Buechler, Luke Walton, Miles Simon, Gilbert Arenas, Hassan Adams, the late Sean Rooks, and Chase Budinger to name just a few out of dozens. His passion for the game and its players – he frequently was the first “big-time coach” in a high school gym, as early as 8 in the morning, at camps and grassroots events in the spring and summer – was never quenched. Nor was his connection to the Southern California basketball “scene”, be it coaches, players or events.

That’s why, 51 years after he last coached at LBSU, he remains as much as an icon in and around Long Beach as he does in Tucson or Iowa City.