



Meet Donna Murphy, Kentucky's first Miss Basketball winner and a self-taught star





Basketball star Donna Murphy is one of 32 inductees in the inaugural class of the Newport High School Hall of Fame. Enquirer file APRIL 12, 1975: Donna Murphy. Remember the name. This junior, who stand 5 feet 10 and weighs 125 pounds, scored 67 points and grabbed 50 rebounds in Newport's two state-tournament games.

THE ENQUIRER/TOM HUBBARD

JASON FRAKES | LOUISVILLE COURIER JOURNAL | 13 hours ago



A 12-year-old growing up in the projects of Newport, Kentucky, Donna Murphy was a bowler and a cheerleader but had no idea basketball would ultimately become the sport that brought her fame – if not fortune.

She recalls walking by the neighborhood basketball court, sitting in a swing, becoming fascinated with the young men playing the sport.

She went home, grabbed her brother's basketball and waited for the court to clear.

"I went out there and thought, 'I'll try to put this ball in this hole,'" Murphy said. "I was trying to come up with all kinds of ways to do it. I was getting very frustrated that the ball wouldn't go in.

"And then when it did go in, I was hooked."

Murphy fought through sexism and racism and became the top girls basketball player in Kentucky, winning the state's first Miss Basketball award in 1976.

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Forty-five years later, Murphy reflected on her time as a basketball star at Newport High School and Morehead State University and as a longtime coach in the high school and college ranks.

Newport basketball legend Donna Murphy, right, and hall of fame inductee Cindy Schlosser, her head coach at Newport in 1975. as Newport High School inducted its new hall of fame class Feb. 1, 2019.

JAMES WEBER/THE ENQUIRER

As much as things have changed since 1976, Murphy says too much has remained the same, especially when it comes to coaching opportunities for women and African-Americans.

“I’d like to see the coaching staff be more reflective of the bench they coach,” Murphy said. “Role modeling is important to me. I would love to see those things, but those things really haven’t changed a whole lot over the years, to be honest. ...

“I had been called a lot of names – racist names. I played like a guy, so people called me a guy, called me a man, called me a monkey. I had to go through a whole lot of stuff when I was in high school. But (winning Miss Basketball) helped me know what I did really meant something. It legitimized what I was doing.”



Playing in first girls Sweet 16

Former Newport High Star Donna Murphy sits during a basketball game.

PHOTO PROVIDED

Murphy was a self-taught star who would check out library books about basketball and try to emulate such professional stars as Earl Monroe, Oscar Robertson, Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell and Julius Erving.

Her basketball education came on that neighborhood court, though, playing against men much older than her.

“When I first started playing with guys, they thought it was funny that a girl was out there,” Murphy said. “But when they saw I could play, they started taking me serious. They would play me. I got tired of getting shots blocked, so I had to devise ways that I could outsmart them.”

And once she did, her days of being a cheerleader were finished.

“When you’re cheering for guys you play against and beat,” she said, “it’s no fun.”

Murphy arrived at Newport High School as a freshman in 1972, but it would be two more years before she could actually compete for a spot in the state tournament. The University of Kentucky managed a girls state tournament from 1920-32 before discontinuing it. The Kentucky High School Athletic Association started its girls Sweet 16 for the 1974-75 season.



The summer before that season, Murphy procured a key to the local middle school gym.

“We played all summer long against five guys,” she said. “They played a major role in why we were able to get ourselves ready for the season.”

The 5-foot-10 Murphy said she was motivated by a preseason Courier Journal poll that ranked her as the seventh-best player in the state. She averaged 32.2 points and 20.4 rebounds and led her Newport squad to the Ninth Region title, securing a spot in the first girls Sweet 16 at Eastern Kentucky University’s Alumni Coliseum in Richmond.

In a first-round victory over Russell, Murphy scored 42 points and set two Sweet 16 records that still stand – shots made (21) and shot attempts (44). Newport lost to eventual state champion Butler 51-50 in the quarterfinals – a game Murphy still recalls with some frustration.

“I remember poor officiating,” said Murphy, who earned the Sweet 16’s Ted Sanford

award for her athletic and academic achievements. “I had to sit on the bench for quite a long time because they called a couple of charges on me, and they were blocking. I’m just saying it, OK? ... I was pretty upset when we lost because I felt like I should have been on the floor more. I think that would have helped change the situation.”



A long career in basketball

After her time at Newport High, Donna Murphy went on to play college basketball at Morehead State.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY MOREHEAD STATE ATHLETICS

Murphy failed to make it back to the Sweet 16 during her senior year, as Newport was knocked off by Covington Holy Cross 58-50 in the Ninth Region final.

Murphy averaged 35 points, 20 rebounds and six assists on her way to taking Miss Basketball honors, beating out Butler's Valerie Owens.

Murphy said the award served as validation of her skill.

"When someone says they play like a guy, I don't take that negatively," she said.

"That's what people said, that I played like a guy. I could jump. I could get the rim. I

was shooting a true jump shot – get as high as you can and release it on the way down. I was just naturally gifted in jumping. I was quick, I could shoot, I could rebound, I could handle the ball. The good Lord gave me some potential, and I went out and worked my butt off every day to develop it.”

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DONNA MURPHY

Murphy and Owens became friends after that 1975 Sweet 16 meeting and have maintained that friendship to this day. Murphy is the godmother of Owens' daughter, GiaVanna.



“She deserved to be Miss Basketball because she was all that in the state of Kentucky,” Owens said. “I was proud to be No. 2 behind her. ...

“She had such a drive. She was so focused. Her shot, you just knew every time she

was going up that it was going in. She was such a leader on the floor, and you knew she wanted the ball in her hands. That's just the kind of person she was. She was about business on the court."

Murphy went on to play at Morehead State, where she totaled 2,059 points and 1,442 rebounds and became the first female athlete to have her jersey retired. She played one season with the St. Louis Streak of the Women's Professional Basketball League – making \$14,800 – and had the chance to play professionally in Germany but chose to go into coaching.

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VALERIE OWENS, MURPHY'S BASKETBALL RIVAL AND LONGTIME FRIEND

She served as an assistant coach at Cincinnati, Morehead State, Memphis State, Florida and Kentucky and then started the women's basketball program at Asbury College in 1991. She also coached on the high school level at Lexington Christian and Bryan Station. She's a member of 11 halls of fame.



Murphy had a scare in 2008 when she developed acute immune hepatitis and required a liver transplant. She lives in Lexington, where she's a professor and counselor at Bluegrass Community and Technical College.

She still follows basketball and enjoys watching today's stars. She also wants them to know there were plenty of great players back during her prime.

"I think the Sweet 16s of yesteryear were just as much or even more exciting than they are now," she said. "They've become commercialized over the years and political. It was more pure. It was big back then."

Jason Frakes: [502-582-4046](tel:502-582-4046); jfrakes@courier-journal.com; Twitter: @kyhighs.

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