



ERNST PETERS/The Ledger

George Tinsley, at his home in Winter Haven, is still a big fan of college basketball. He holds several records from his days as a player at Kentucky Wesleyan College.

George Tinsley Remembers Great Championship Seasons

By RICK BROWN
The Ledger

A smile flashes across the face of George Tinsley of Winter Haven with the mention of the NCAA-Division II men's Elite 8 national basketball championships.

The 56-year-old Tinsley has fond memories of the Division II tournament. He played on three championship teams (1966, 1968, 1969) at Kentucky Wesleyan College in Owensboro.

"We had a great little run," said Tinsley, who finished his career as Wesleyan's second-leading scorer (2,014) and leading rebounder (1,115). "Once you win it the first time, you know what it takes. It was a great ride."

The Elite 8 will be played in Lakeland for the first time March 26-29. Tinsley, who is the owner of the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in Tampa, will definitely be among the crowd.

He may get to see his alma mater. Kentucky Wesleyan has reached the championship game the last five years and is currently ranked No. 3 in the country.

Tinsley, who grew up in Louisville, Ky., helped start Wesleyan's run of championships as a freshman in 1966.

Wesleyan defeated Southern Illinois, 54-51, in 1966; Indiana State, 63-52, in 1968; and Southwest Missouri State, 75-71, in 1969. The team finished third in 1967.

A four-year starter, Tinsley was the most valuable player of the tournament his senior year, scoring 23 points and grabbing six rebounds in the title game.

As a junior, he scored 21 points in the title game.

As a freshman, Tinsley held Southern Illinois University's Walt Frazier to six points in the championship game.

Frazier went on to star for the NBA New York Knicks and is now a member of basketball's Hall

of Fame.

"The elation of winning three championships was unbelievable then and now," Tinsley said. "To know also that a fourth just escaped me when we finished third that year upsets me. The elation was only matched by the great relationships established with friends on the team, the student body, professors and administrators, community supporters and my wife (Seretha), who was a cheerleader."

Tinsley was a two-time All-American and a three-time All-Regional Tournament selection.

After his collegiate days, Tinsley was drafted by the Oakland Oaks of the American Basketball Association and the Chicago Bulls of the NBA. Tinsley chose the Oaks and played four years with the Oaks, Kentucky Colonels, Miami Floridians and New York Nets.

He returned to Louisville to teach and coach, then later was an events coordinator at the civic center before moving to Atlanta to start working with KFC.

In 1984, he moved to Auburndale and has been in the area since, raising his children, Penni D. Tinsley, 26, and George Tinsley II, 24, with his wife Seretha.

"He's one of the most-celebrated basketball players and students in Kentucky Wesleyan history," said KWC sports information director Roy Pickerill. "You just say his first name and everyone knows him."

"He's not only a winner, he's a champion," Pickerill said. "That's his life and in business. He's a champion."

Still, nothing can take away the memories of college, where they have retired Tinsley's No. 50 jersey.

"I'm still close to a lot of my teammates," Tinsley said. "And when I go to the games now, there are some people who go who were there when I was playing. Those are loyal fans and they really have a good relationship with the players."

Elmhorst, the co-chairs of the committee, and all those working with them to make this event successful also deserve the gratitude of the Lakeland community," Lee said.

The NCAA will receive a \$40,000 guarantee, which has already been raised. Polk County Sports Marketing tossed in \$25,000, while the rest was raised in sponsorships.

Normally, the NCAA would also receive a percentage of anything made after that, but Allen Johnson, director of The Lakeland Center, said the contract does not promise the NCAA any additional money.

Polk County Sports Marketing's Jackson said the county should receive an economic boost of \$1.6 million. He called that estimate "conservative."

Officials from Evansville said the economic impact to their city last year was \$300,000.

Teams and fans will fill hotels and local restaurants, Jackson said. If just the teams come to town, that's 208 rooms being filled.

"It's almost a double-edge sword," Jackson said. "If we get a team from Bakersfield, Calif., attendance isn't going to be as high. We'll fill up the stands if Florida Southern is in, but we don't count those folks as economic impact."

"Now, if we get a team that is close, like on the East Coast within a day's drive, then those numbers are going to skyrocket."

WHEN THE TEAMS ARRIVE

When the eight teams arrive by next Monday, they will be greeted at the airport by one of eight local community clubs.

Teams will stay at The Four Points Sheraton, The Terrace, Holiday Inn South, Holiday Inn Lakeland and the Best Western Diplomat Inn.

There will be activities for the teams once they arrive. There will be a welcome reception for the teams on that Monday, where they will see the 1981 Florida Southern Division II National Championship team honored, and they will attend a banquet on Tuesday.

There will be a basketball clinic on that Friday, as well as an opportunity to attend the Detroit Tigers' final home spring training game at Joker Marchant Stadium.

The teams are also scheduled to do some community service at local hospitals.

There won't be many changes for The Lakeland Center. The Elite 8 will be less than two weeks removed from the boys' state basketball tournament. The NCAA will provide the official logo at midcourt.

The center will also play host to an opening-day reception for the teams, as well as the banquet on to one another.

The Lakeland Center arena is considering whether to go with a full house or a half house for the tournament.

A full house, which would be the entire arena, holds 4,700 for basketball. A half house, when there is a curtain separating part of the arena, holds 3,300.

The center must also come up with additional lighting for the television broadcast.

"That's about the one uncompleted task so far," Johnson said. "We have options, we just want to find it at an affordable price."

"As far as the crowd and game operations, we have Florida Southern College assisting, so it should be pretty easy."

GETTING THE WORD OUT

The main job now for the LOC is to get the word out, not only in Polk County, but also in Tampa and Orlando.

There have been radio ads, as well as television spots on cable television to attract attention to the tournament.