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Spencer Haywood's titanic debut honored tonight

BY KRISTA JAHNKE • FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER • DECEMBER 17, 2008

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The Titans will relive one of their most smashing moments tonight.

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It has been 40 years since Pershing High star and Olympic [gold](#) medalist Spencer Haywood made his University of Detroit debut and brought down the house -- and a backboard -- with a thunderous (and illegal) dunk with about 6 minutes to play.

The final score that night in 1968 was Detroit 105, Aquinas 40. Haywood had 36 points and 32 rebounds -- all before his monster dunk, which ended the game because the gym had no replacement for the smashed backboard.

Free Press sports writer Jack Saylor described the game this way in his Dec. 1, 1968, article: "Haywood jumped center and won the opening tip. It was the turning point of the game."

Tonight, also against Aquinas, Detroit Mercy will honor Haywood -- who joined the now-defunct American Basketball Association after one season -- with "Spencer Haywood Night."

Haywood, 59, has strict orders from his two high school-aged daughters to "not be embarrassing," but he said he has been stretching and will try to recreate his dunk.

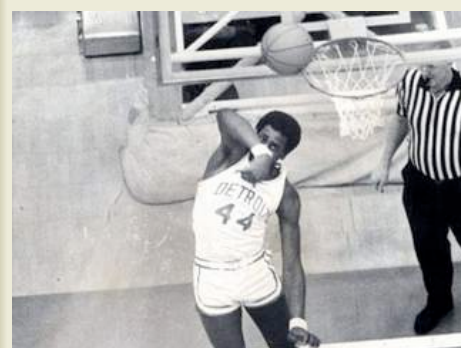
"I can still dunk," he said. "I just can't take off. But I'm going to try it."

Dunking was illegal in college basketball in those days, and Haywood knew he'd get a technical. But he said the emotion of the night overtook him when he jumped over an Aquinas player who was set to take a charge.

"I was feeling the momentum and the hype being back in Detroit from the Olympics in 1968," Haywood said. "I jumped up, and I didn't think I'd go over his head, but I did. I was over the backboard, so I thought, 'Why not dunk it?' I did, and the backboard said, 'Pow!' and shattered

everywhere. I came off with the rim in the hand."

Haywood said he flung the rim aside "like some kind of superhero" and checked to make sure the fiberglass hadn't cut him. The sellout crowd of 4,500 soaked up his antics, as did his coach, Bob Calihan.



DICK TRIPP/DFP file photo

Spencer Haywood blocks a shot versus Marquette in 1968-69. Haywood was the top rebounder in the nation, averaging 22.1 per game.



In his one season at U-D, Spencer Haywood set a school record by averaging 32.1 points per game.

(ED HAUN/Detroit Free Press file photo)

HAYWOOD HIGHLIGHTS

Memorable moments in the career of Spencer Haywood, who will be honored at tonight's Detroit Mercy game at Calihan Hall in Detroit.

1967: Led Pershing High to state basketball title.

1968: Leading scorer on gold medal-winning U.S. Olympic team.

1969: First-team All-America at Detroit (joining UCLA's Lew Alcindor, LSU's Pete Maravich, Purdue's Rick Mount and Niagara's Calvin Murphy).

1970: ABA rookie of the year and MVP with Denver.

1983: Twelve-season NBA career ends; best years with SuperSonics in the early '70s, with whom he averaged nearly 25 points per game in five seasons.

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"Coach was jumping up and down on the sideline, screaming, 'Oh, my God!' " Haywood said. "In the locker room afterward, he said, 'I hope they make dunking legal because that was the most exciting thing I've seen.' "

Haywood went on to All-America honors and set the Titans' single-season scoring record at 32.1 points per game. He also was the top rebounder in the nation at 22.1 per game.

The first 1,000 fans who arrive for tonight's doubleheader -- the women's team plays Morehead State at 5 p.m. -- will receive a special Haywood trading card. He also will be honored during the game and will serve as a guest coach.

Haywood said he keeps busy these days watching his two daughters play high school basketball at Plymouth. He also owns a tile and marble company with headquarters in Las Vegas and blogs for NBA.com and the National Basketball Retired Players Association.

For a long time, Haywood went public with his longing to be more recognized for his basketball contributions. He's not in the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame despite averaging 19.2 points in 12 NBA seasons and winning an Olympic gold medal.

In 1971, Haywood went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to fight the rule barring players from entering the NBA before their class reached college graduation. He won, paving the way for guys like Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant and [LeBron James](#).

But his NBA career was derailed by cocaine use -- his only championship [ring](#) came with the Lakers in 1980, but he was kicked off the team in the middle of the playoffs.

Haywood, long recovered from addiction problems, said he has accepted that recognition for his on-court contributions won't come "on his time."

"It will happen on a higher spiritual term than mine," he said. "I have learned to let go, and 'Let thy will be done, not mine.' I'm always learning some new lesson, and now I'm learning to let go."

Last season, the Seattle SuperSonics retired his jersey number, where it hung in the rafters for a few months before the team moved to Oklahoma City.

Now, 40 years after his smashing debut, Haywood gets his night of honor at Detroit Mercy.

"See?" Haywood said. "I let go, and this is what happens."

Contact **KRISTA JAHNKE** at 313-223-4493 or kjahnke@freepress.com. Check out her *Offbeat* columns at www.freep.com/sports.

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RoadRage wrote:

Brings back memories of when UofD was a basketball powerhouse with Dave DeBusschere and Charlie North... and who could forget Dick Vitale's reign. Thanks Spencer!

12/17/2008 11:10:21 a.m. EDT

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hmmgdetroit wrote:

Congrats to Spenser, always a classy guy. The NBA owes you.

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boyofsummer wrote:

This is an interesting and "Mercy-ful" chapter in the life of Spencer Haywood.

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dcstan wrote:

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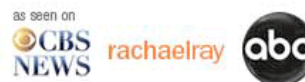
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