

UNTOLD STORIES OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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PRENTICE DRAGONS CROSS THE COLOR LINE

1969. It was a momentous year in Alabama high school basketball. The papers were calling the February tournaments the "most interesting ever." Why? For the first time they included Negro schools. A star player on one of those breakthrough teams was Montevallo's own Lawrence "Butch" Lilly, center for the Prentice High School Dragons. Black teams claimed victory in two of the four championship divisions that year. Prentice's Dragons lost in the first round, but Lilly made the All-Tournament team and went on to distinguish himself as a 7-foot rebounding phenomenon for the Alabama State Hornets. ("If that ball left your hand I was at it.") In 1973 he was drafted by the New York Knicks.

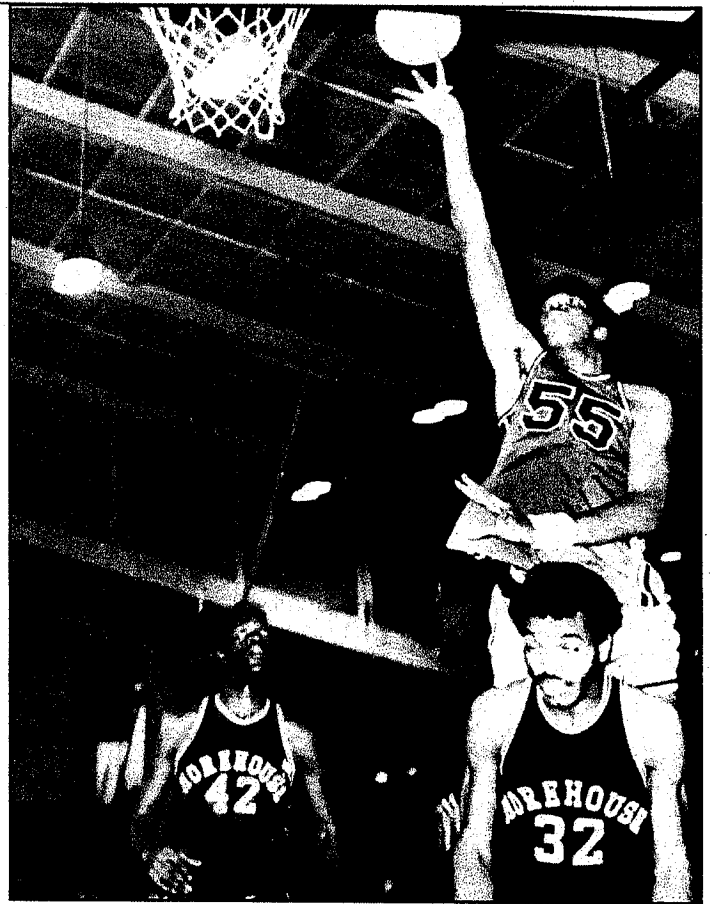
His professional career was cut short by a knee injury and to this day he regards the injury as a blessing. He was not prepared to handle the fame and temptations of the NBA life. He advises kids who want to play basketball at the college and professional level "not to leave home without God. Work hard and be committed to playing basketball." Commitment to the game lives on in the family. Lawrence and his wife Catherine (Abston), his college sweetheart, have a granddaughter, Lauryn, who plays guard for the University of West Alabama Tigers Women's Basketball Team.

"Butch" Lilly, who still resides in Montevallo, told us recently that playing basketball "was a way to establish himself." He grew up in Brierfield, went to Seven Pines Elementary, and then attended Prentice, soon to be merged with the all-white Montevallo High School just down the road. He didn't start playing until the tenth grade. "I didn't like basketball," he recalls, "but after I learned the basics it went on from there. I used the gift of height that was given to me."



LAWRENCE "BUTCH" LILLY

He was encouraged to believe in himself as a player by his B-Team coach at Prentice, Mr. Tommie Frederick, and his high school coach, Mr. Arthur Greenlee. Some of his best memories turn on his rivalry with James Powell (nickname "Bull") from Alabaster during his high school years. Games between their schools were known as Butch vs. Bull.



CENTER FOR THE ASU HORNETS

Interviewed by Bill Plott in 1999, he remembered what it was like to be part of the first all-black team to play in the newly integrated state tournament in Memorial Coliseum in Tuscaloosa. "I'm sure we were nervous and playing in the coliseum was awesome. We had been playing in much smaller places, nothing like that." It may have added to the stress that his team was crossing a long guarded color line. Herman (Bubba) Scott of the Alabama High School Athletic Assn. predicted that the inclusion of Black athletes would "revolutionize" basketball in the state. "The game is going to be faster and better than ever." White teams will have to play "a faster, run and shoot type of game . . . because they know they'll have to play that way against some of the other teams." For spectators the game will be "more exciting and appealing . . . than ever before."

Civil rights legislation passed in the 1960s brought vastly important social changes to our country. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 sought to end segregation in the South and prohibit discrimination everywhere in housing, voting, and other areas. There was resistance of course, and it continues. But a wonderful and immediately visible change occurred in gyms and coliseums across the state where young men like Montevallo's "Butch" Lilly ushered in a new era of basketball. It was a newly thrilling game that brought onto the court young people of all colors and generated shared enthusiasm in the stands.

We are grateful to Lawrence and Catherine Lilly for providing photos and memories. We draw also from "A Prediction is Made. . .," *Montgomery Advertiser*, Mar 16, 1969 and Bill Plott's interview with Mr Lilly in "A Piece of History," *Birmingham News*, Feb 28, 1999.

Submitted by Kathy King & Anita Stewart Sims. Contact us at Movaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of fact or interpretation.