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TOP STORY

Hilltoppers retire jersey of '60s basketball star Dwight Smith

By Chip Hutcheson Kentucky Today
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Siblings of the late Dwight Smith took center stage at halftime of the Western Kentucky University's home game Saturday, Feb. 4 against UTEP. WKU retired Smith's jersey, 56 years after he died in a car accident following his senior season at Western Kentucky. Pictured (from left) are Greg Smith, Sheila Smith-Anderson and Tony Smith. Pictured at right is Timothy Caboni, WKU president.

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BOWLING GREEN — A strong delegation of current and former Princeton residents were in Bowling Green on Saturday, Feb. 4 to applaud the jersey retirement of the late Dwight Smith, a standout basketball player at Princeton Dotson and then at Western Kentucky University.

A busload from Princeton was among the 4,200 people attending the event. Estimates are that at least 60 Princeton residents, plus a number of former residents, showed up to honor the first Black basketball player to sign with WKU in 1963.

The halftime ceremony at the UTEP-WKU game also drew former WKU teammates to celebrate the achievements of Smith, who died in a car accident in May 1967, just months after he finished his senior season at Western Kentucky University and was drafted by the Los Angeles Lakers.

Many echoed that the retirement ceremony was long overdue.



“It’s odd because I thought his jersey had already been retired,” said his brother, Greg Smith, also a former WKU basketball and former NBA player. Greg was a junior at Princeton Dotson when the Bearcats won the 2nd Region championship, then played his senior year at Caldwell County.

“It’s about time — it’s good because he is receiving the endorsement of what he did in the ’60s.”

Greg and his wife, Linda, reside in Portland, Oregon, where he finished his NBA career with the Portland Trailblazers. The couple are now retired from media professions.

Greg said their visits to Princeton were stopped during COVID-19, and added, “We don’t get back as much as we like.” The couple has five children and 15 grandchildren, including two sets of twins — and all are within 10-15 miles of them.

A sister, Sheila Smith-Anderson, said the retirement ceremony “is so awesome for our family — not just our biological family, but for the city of Princeton, Princeton Dotson (former all-Black school in Princeton that closed in 1963) and Caldwell County. A lot of people have been waiting for this day.

Smith-Anderson, retired assistant superintendent of St. Louis (Missouri) Public Schools, now lives in Paducah. She said it is an acknowledgement of her late brother’s “worth in history — a lot of people who have gone on to glory wanted this.” She applauded the busload from Princeton who were in E.A. Diddle Arena for the ceremony. “There are a lot of people here of it, including kids who never got to see him play,” she noted, saying she felt “the depth and love” of people from her hometown.

Also, she said that even though the jersey retirement came 56 years after his death, there are many who have benefited by his legacy since that time. Smith-Anderson said she has received messages from people who were aided by a scholarship in her brother’s honor. She said some of those weren’t athletic enough or had high enough grades for other scholarships, but were able to get a college education because of his “scholarship for civility.”

Also attending the ceremony and on the floor for the unveiling of the jersey banner was another brother, Tony, who now lives in the Chicago suburbs.

Former teammate Clem Haskins also attended the ceremony, heaping praise for his former teammate and roommate at Western.

“It’s long, long overdue,” said Haskins, who went on to play in the NBA and then coached in the college ranks.

“Dwight Smith was way ahead of his time. Not only was he a great basketball player, but a great friend — he was a special person, a special player. I never could get him.

“He was an excellent teammate, was captain of the team, and if you can get a point guard like Dwight Smith, you can be a Final Four contender.

“A lot of people don’t know that he averaged 35 points a game in high school, but converted to point guard in college. That’s what you call sacrifice.”

After Western Kentucky beat UTEP 74-69 in a Conference USA game, Hilltopper head basketball coach Rick Stansbury reflected on the significance of the day.

“We had a (reception) before the game,” Stansbury said on retiring Smith’s jersey. “We had the opportunity to meet all of this family and a whole bunch of coaches and players that were on that team ... to be able to come out here today, we wore shirts (with his number) before the game, to honor him. To come out here and find a way to win a game with toughness, evidently that’s who he was, that’s what everybody says he was about, toughness, that was pretty special.”

Former Princetonians Joe Dan Beavers and Chris George — both fixtures on the WKU campus, were grateful for the day. Princetonian Tyler Beshear was instrumental in making arrangements for the bus trip from Princeton.

“It was a good day on The Hill,” he said in a Facebook post. “It was also an emotional day. Lots of smiles, laughs, tears, hugs and handshakes. I’m so glad so many folks were able to make the trip and for those in the community who helped make it happen.”

Sponsors for the bus trip, which included travel, lunch and a game ticket, were Planters Bank, First Southern Bank, Farmers Bank, Goodwin Insurance Agency, Princeton Rotary Club, Harrison Street Baptist Church and Beshear Sawmill.

This story is courtesy of Kentucky Today, the online news website of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

