



The Adrian Dantley Story for the 62nd Induction Banquet Program

The 62nd induction banquet was held on November 9, 2023. Story written by Chris Zang.

NBA Hall of Famers rarely credit their history teacher with their basketball success. Of course, the man Adrian Dantley learned his U.S. and world history from at DeMatha High School in Hyattsville, Md., wasn't your average instructor. Morgan Wootten, who coached and taught Dantley, had an .869 winning percentage (1,274-192) as a basketball coach and in 2000 became just the third high school coach in the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

"You wouldn't be talking to me today if it wasn't for Coach Wootten," says Dantley, 68, who was born in Washington, D.C., and lives in Montgomery County, Md., with his wife of 42 years, Dinitri. "Thanks to him I learned all the fundamentals, which gave me an advantage when I went to college and the NBA. And they were things Coach Wootten taught me as a 13-year-old freshman!"

Admittedly a "little chunky" in high school, Dantley learned his lessons well enough to become a high school All-American who was recruited by colleges near and far. The hometown University of Maryland almost got him. "Lefty Driesell came to my house and said, 'We have to have you, Adrian.' And he pulled out a red jersey and a white jersey, No. 44, with Dantley on the back. I went upstairs and called Coach Wootten and told him, 'I might want to go to Maryland.'"

North Carolina came calling, too "but I didn't want to stand in the corner 25 minutes a game. Dean Smith was running the four corners then," Dantley says, chuckling.

Then he visited South Bend, Ind., and fell in love with Notre Dame. "I remember driving on to campus and seeing that Golden Dome. I knew right then this is the place for me." It didn't hurt that three guys he knew played for the Irish. They wasted no time making an impact in 1974, ending UCLA's 88-game win streak, 71-70. "I remember Bill Walton crying on the floor after the game," recalls Dantley, who had turned down UCLA recruiters the year before.

Dantley turned pro after his junior season but before doing so he helped the U.S. complete some unfinished business as an Olympian, scoring a game-high 30 points as the Americans reclaimed the Olympic gold with a 95-74 win over Yugoslavia, making amends for the controversial loss to the Soviets in 1972. "It was a great experience," Dantley recalls of wearing the USA jersey and hearing the national anthem on the medal stand. "Of course we wanted to play the Soviets after '72 but they lost to Yugoslavia."

Drafted sixth by the Buffalo Braves, Dantley made an immediate impact as Rookie of the Year, launching a 15-year NBA career where he won several scoring titles and averaged 30 points a game for the Utah Jazz from 1981 to 1984. The six-time NBA All-Star finished his career with 23,177 points, which was then ninth on the list.

An undersized forward at 6 feet 5, 210 pounds, Dantley still did much of his scoring in the post, twisting and turning his body to maneuver around slower defenders. How did he overcome bigger players?

“Conditioning,” says Dantley, who still has a rigorous daily workout schedule at his home in Silver Spring, Md. “I felt like I was always better conditioned than the guy I played against. Plus the fundamentals I learned under Coach Wootten, head fakes, pump fakes to get a bigger player off his feet.”

The resulting fouls sent Dantley to the free throw line, where he also excelled, repeating Wootten’s mantra “over the front rim, backspin, follow through” on each foul shot. He did that successfully 6,832 times, which still ranks No. 11 on the NBA list.

Dantley tried some coaching himself, working as an assistant to Terry Truax at Towson University in 1993-1996 and an assistant with the Denver Nuggets from 2003-2011. Would he like to do more coaching? “No, I don’t think so,” he says. “Today’s players you have to coddle them so much. It’s more coaching off the court than on the court. Time management, things like that. I never wanted to take a game off.”

Today Dantley is happy to still be on the court ... with a whistle in his mouth as a referee. “I do all levels — elementary school, middle school, high school, senior citizens 70 and older. Those guys give me the most problems,” says Dantley laughing. He finds it highly satisfying. “Over the years, I’ve seen kids like 8, 9, 10 years old and how they got better. It’s great,” says Dantley, who has three children (and two grandkids) of his own. “I might do 130-140 games a year. I also work as a crossing guard at the school. All the kids know me. Best part-time job in America.”

Dantley will enjoy tonight’s trip to Baltimore for his induction into the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame more than a visit here in 1973 when DeMatha and Dunbar of Baltimore played in a battle of unbeaten teams. “We had won a triple-overtime game against St. John’s the night before [43rd consecutive victory], and I think we played Dunbar at 12 noon the next day,” Dantley recalls. “We had no idea about Dunbar, but once we got there [Baltimore Civic Center] and saw it was a sold-out arena, we knew we were in for a game. Skip Wise was tremendous,” scoring 22 of his 39 points in the fourth quarter of an 85-71 Dunbar victory. “That game definitely turned everything around for Baltimore basketball.”

Tonight Dantley will be victorious, joining Wootten in the MDSAHOFF. “He was a great communicator, great teacher, great coach, great individual. I’m proud to join him.”