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WKU ATHLETICS

WKU honors latest Hall of Fame class

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The WKU Hall of Fame class Sheila Drake (from left), wife of inductee Daryl Drake, Harry Jones, Courtney Lee and Natalie Powers Payne.

WKU ATHLETICS

It was a day for reflection and celebration for the 2023 class of the WKU Athletic Hall of Fame.

This year's class included Daryl Drake, who played football in the late 1970s before returning as an assistant coach from 1983-91, Harry Jones who starred for WKU baseball from 1968-70 and a pair of basketball players who

made their marks on the E.A. Diddle Arena floor where they gathered for Saturday's induction ceremony – Courtney Lee and Natalie Powers Payne.

“It means everything,” Lee said. “It just shows all the hard work over the years is paying off. Now you can just reap the benefits of putting in that work. Also, it is just everybody that is here. A lot of familiar faces, a lot of people that had an impact on my career and helped me along the way. It's also good to see them.



“This is an individual accomplishment and achievement, but none of it would have been possible without them.”

Powers said it was an incredible feeling to be part of a select group of WKU student-athletes.

“I think what makes it even more special is to be able to celebrate it with my family,” Powers said. “It means a lot. I’ll always consider Diddle Arena, WKU, the campus – all of it – my second home. Everybody was so supportive

when I was here, coaches to athletic trainers to strength coaches. It's an incredible honor. I am just blessed to be here."

Family was a recurring theme among the four inductees. Drake, who passed away in 2019, was represented by his wife Sheila who spoke of how much the late Jimmy Feix meant to her husband and how he helped pave the way for Drake's coaching career, which included stops at Georgia and Baylor as well as NFL franchises in Chicago, Arizona and Pittsburgh.

Jones spoke about how his father's military background led to his drive and determination, where he went from a walk-on to a three-time All-Ohio Valley Conference selection.

Powers and Lee both had family members present for Saturday's ceremony.

"My family has always been so supportive," Powers said. "Ever since I was a little girl all the way through high school and college, they followed me to every game they could possibly attend. Now they come to my games and I coach. Everything comes full circle and I couldn't be more blessed to have my parents still with me, traveling with me around this game that I love and grew up loving."

Powers said she got the phone call letting her know she was going to be inducted while at her daughter's softball practice.

“I didn’t know who the number was,” Powers said. “I answered it and it was Paul Just and he told me that I had been selected into the hall of fame. I immediately had tears – just overwhelmed with emotion. Once you are removed so far from the program, at my age, all those memories start flushing back. Your teammates, your coaches – all they did for you for this moment to become a reality. It’s very emotional.”

Lee said he was excited when he got the call.

“It’s always good to come back,” Lee said. “But also coming back to receive this award – I’m kind of speechless. I was definitely excited and was thrilled about it. It’s different now because when I was here, I was a young man. I come back now as a man, as a father and so my daughter gets to experience this and see this.”

Lee had a stellar career from 2005-08 that left him as the program’s all-time leading scorer alongside Jim McDaniels. He was a three-time all-conference selection, the Sun Belt Conference Player of the Year as a senior and named to WKU’s all-century team. A first-round selection in the 2008 NBA Draft, Lee played 12 years in the NBA – continuing the professional pipeline that has since included former WKU teammate Jeremy Evans and Charles Basse.

“It’s huge for the university,” Lee said. “It lets all the kids know that you don’t have to go to a major university to pave your future. You can come here, put the work in and

get the recognition and still achieve your goals and dreams. It's huge for the university, for sure.”

Evans, Ty Rogers and Matt Maresca were teammates who joined Lee at Saturday's ceremony.

“In that locker room we built a strong bond with one another,” Lee said. “Going out practicing every day, going out on the court, just spending time with each other. You build those lifelong friendships. That speaks volumes for the guys that are here. I know Jeremy came in yesterday, I believe from South Carolina. Matt Maresca lives here and Ty drove down from Louisville, so it definitely means a lot to see those guys.”

Diddle Arena has seen a lot of changes since Powers made her mark, starting in 1998 and then concluding from 2000-02. Powers was named to the Sun Belt Conference all-time team during the conference's 30th anniversary in 2006. She was sixth on the all-time scoring list when she graduated with 1,641 points and remains one of the program's all-time 3-point shooters as well as setting the mark in free-throw shooting – including a program best 87.4% in her senior year.

She is now the head coach at Daviess County High School.

“I think my last year here was when they started the construction,” Powers said. “I believe we even had some practices at the old junior high. The auxiliary gym ... just

the renovations in general with the locker rooms. It's amazing. What student-athlete wouldn't want to come here and be a part of this?"

While Lee and Powers are both years removed from their respective WKU playing days, both remain invested in the programs.

Powers said she has been impressed with current women's coach Greg Collins.

"He's great," Powers said. "I actually got to come to some of his practices and watch recently. My girls came to the Little Lady Topper summer camp a summer ago. I've been around the players. One of my former players is a manager here, Kennedy Rowan, so I feel pretty connected to the program.

"He does a great job. His staff is amazing. I feel like he's a player's coach. He lets them read and create. He trusts them to carry out the plan. I don't know what player wouldn't want to come here and play for him."

Lee was also impressed with new men's basketball coach Steve Lutz.

"If you watched the game against Wichita State, you could see the effort from the guys," Lee said. "They were getting after it on the defensive end, playing together. That's the biggest thing that you can ask for."&end}

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