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TOP STORY

OUR OPINION

McDaniels lifted WKU to rare heights

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Western Kentucky University lost a towering presence Wednesday.

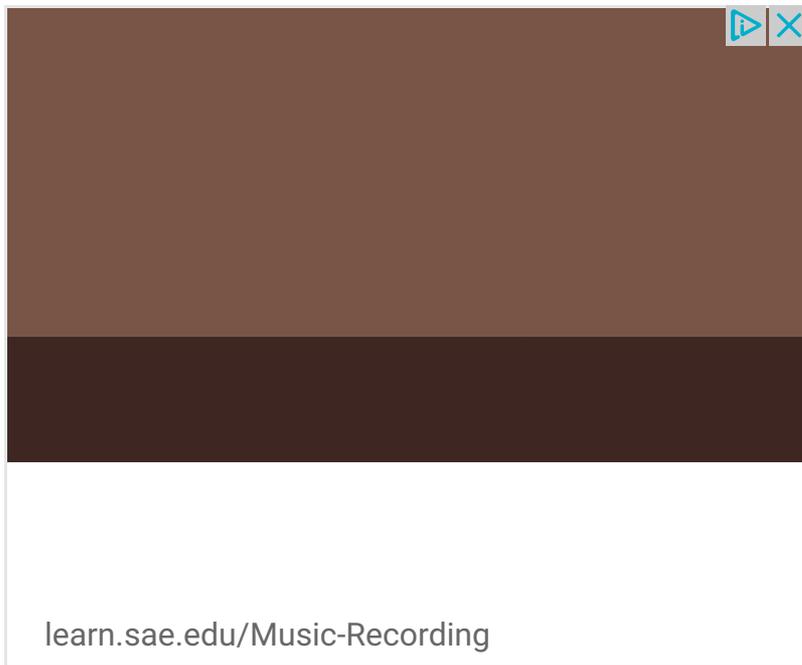
Jim McDaniels, whose brilliant basketball career culminated in the Hilltoppers' only appearance in the NCAA Final Four in 1971, died Wednesday at age 69. His legacy at WKU went far beyond his spectacular play – McDaniels served for decades as a tireless supporter and representative of the school he once lifted to dizzying heights as a basketball player.

A constant presence at E.A. Diddle Arena and around campus in the years since he moved back to the region where he grew up, the Scottsville native provided a shining example for WKU's men's basketball program – past, present and future.

A slender 7-footer with a deadly shooting touch, McDaniels was a star the minute he stepped on campus in Bowling Green. Due to NCAA rules of the time, McDaniels didn't get to suit up for the varsity team as a freshman. By the time his sophomore year rolled around, McDaniels was primed to make an impact. He was the unquestioned star on that 1968-69 WKU squad that finished 16-10 and third in the Ohio Valley Conference. He averaged a double-double with 24.8 points and 12.5 rebounds per game.

But McDaniels was just getting started for the Hilltoppers. As a junior, he won OVC Player of the Year honors after averaging another double-double with 28.6 points and 13.6 rebounds per game, leading coach John Oldham's squad to the OVC regular-season title with a perfect 14-0 mark and a spot in the NCAA Tournament as the Hilltoppers went 22-3 overall.

As a senior in 1970-71, McDaniels managed to increase his output yet again as he averaged 29.3 points and 15.1 rebounds per game, winning another OVC Player of the Year honor leading the Tops back to the NCAA Tournament as conference champions.



McDaniels proved nearly unstoppable in the NCAA tournament, leading the Tops to a thrilling 74-72 win over Artis Gilmore-led Jacksonville in the opening round before helping demolish Kentucky 107-83 in the second round. After battling to an 81-78

overtime win over Ohio State to reach the Final Four, the Hilltoppers faltered when McDaniels fouled out late in a 92-89 overtime loss to Villanova. WKU regrouped to beat Kansas 77-75 in the NCAA third-place game.

Those NCAA wins were later vacated after an investigation ruled McDaniels had signed a pro contract before the tournament, a mistake McDaniels always regretted afterward.

After finishing his career with 2,238 points – still tied for first all-time in program history with current NBA guard Courtney Lee, although McDaniels played one less season – and still WKU’s leader in career field goals (935), career scoring average (27.6 points per game) and double-doubles (74), McDaniels embarked on a professional career in the ABA and NBA that lasted until 1978.

When he was ready to settle down and raise a family, McDaniels came home. In the years that followed, his support of the program he once raised to almost the pinnacle of college basketball never wavered. “Big Mac” was a Hilltopper, through and through.