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BASKETBALL

Ellet, UA legend Bobby 'Sumthin' Smith enters Akron Public Schools Athletics Hall of Fame



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Bobby “Sumthin” Smith is an Akron basketball legend whose larger-than-life personality continues to steal the show.

Even at age 78.

Evidence emerged when Smith delivered a highly entertaining acceptance speech Saturday night as part of his Akron Public Schools Athletics Hall of Fame induction.

“One of the greatest of all time as far as characters,” APS assistant athletic director Ron Linger quipped.

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Smith pointed out he's “APS through and through” because he attended the school district from the time he was in kindergarten until he graduated from Ellet in 1964. Smith became a basketball star at Ellet and continued to thrive as a guard at the University of Akron. He helped the Zips go 79-28 as a four-year starter and finished with 1,437 career points, ranking fourth in UA history at the time.

“I think I was an overachiever — 5-9, 150 pounds. That's not the biggest guy,” Smith said.

In 2017, then-Ellet senior A.J. Gareri broke Smith's school scoring record. Smith attended the record-setting game and autographed a ball for Gareri, who scored 1,286 career points at Ellet.

“I only have one regret as a player,” Smith said during his induction speech. “There was no 3-point line. If there would have been a 3-point line when I was playing, whoever that guy that beat my record, sorry about his luck. He would've never had a chance.”

Because of health issues, Smith is in a wheelchair. None of it stopped him from holding court during the APS banquet at Guy's Party Center in Akron, telling stories and drawing laughs.

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Linger has known Smith since the 1980s and appreciates a good sense of humor. Emceeding the induction ceremony, Linger showed the crowd several quotes from famous basketball coaches on a slideshow. He included one quote he attributes to Smith, who coached for 25 years, guiding the boys basketball programs at Norton, South and East.

“I go over there to East one time when he was still coaching. It's before the season starts,” Linger said. “I say, 'Coach, you got any shooters this year?' [Smith said,] 'My man, we got shooters. We always got shooters, but we need makers. That's what we need — some makers. Everybody has shooters. We want makers.' And I just laughed my butt off.”

Smith was a maker. Actually, his marksmanship led to the creation of his classic “Sumthin” nickname.

“Red Cochrane, the old athletic director at the Zips, he walked in [the gym] with a couple people, and I happened to throw in a jump shot from a long ways away,” Smith recalled. “He said, 'Ain't he something?' It kind of stuck. I was a freshman when they nailed me with that title.”

Smith's coaching wardrobe was something, too. A powder-blue tuxedo on the South sideline became part of City Series lore.

“He was flamboyant at a time when that wasn't really the norm at all,” Linger said. “The players loved him. He had some great teams.”

As a coach, Smith won four City Series championships — two with South and two with East.

“I'll never forget the old superintendent, [Conrad] Ott, came in after my first city championship,” Smith said. “He said, 'What do you have to say?' I said, 'Well, this is what you hired me for.’”

“That's why he always remembered me. He said I was a little crazy. All coaches are a little crazy. Fess up. You know that. All coaches are kind of out there.”

Crazy? Sure. Caring? Absolutely.

Smith spent the 2002-03 season as the girls basketball coach at East. He had never previously coached a girls team. He did it for one season because the East girls had been left without a coach, and he didn't want their season to be canceled.

“I didn't really want to do it,” Smith said, “but I didn't want all those nice kids to get bypassed.”

A longtime physical education teacher, Smith excelled at organizing and running fundraisers at East. When Linger worked at Central-Hower, he copied Smith's blueprint.

“He helped out not just sports — ROTC, the band, any club that was going on at East,” Linger said.

All these years later, Smith is a new member of a club. It's called the Akron Public Schools Athletics Hall of Fame.

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