

By any measure, Lou Skurcenski was an exceptional man—a nationally-ranked basketball player of Olympic and professional caliber, a leader on and off the court whose competitiveness and drive were tempered by warmth and compassion, a successful industrial research chemist, and most importantly, a loving husband and father taken decades too soon.

Lou was born to a family of simple means. His Mother was a devoted wife and mother. She was a hard worker who earned extra money at a knitting mill. Lou's father, a World War II veteran, earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees after the war. While attending college, Lou's Dad balanced his life as husband, father, and working as a fireman and at a meat market. Education was highly valued in the Skurcenski family.

Lou had a strong work ethic beginning at an early age. During high school, he had a lawn mowing business. While in college, his summers were spent working at a local factory.

When Lou went off to college on a basketball scholarship—one that required him to play ball and work in the school cafeteria—he had to dedicate himself not just to his team and sport, but also to his studies. A chemistry degree demanded his time and attention.

Lou was an All-American who was the starting center for the Westminster College (New Wilmington, Pennsylvania) basketball team that was voted the top small college team in American in 1961-62. He and his Titan teammates, along with Grambling College, toured South America for six weeks on a goodwill tour sponsored by the U.S. State Department. Lou participated in the 1964 Olympic Trials, and was drafted in the 1964 NBA Draft by Philadelphia 76ers.

Lou was a long-time research chemist with Phillips Petroleum Company. Early in his career at the Research Center, he balanced his laboratory work during the day and practicing with the Phillips 66ers basketball team after 5 o'clock. In one year, (October to March) the team traveled approximately 23,000 miles playing in 20 states from New York to Washington and from North Dakota to Florida, playing approximately 50 away games. Between road trips, Lou continued his work at the research center, catching up with the back-log of samples that accumulated while he was gone.

He also was a tremendous role and mentor for countless youth in local

sports, schools, church, and community. He tutored students in chemistry and was involved with youth sports, including coaching at the Boys' Club and YMCA.

In 1998, his life was cut far too short after a valiant 12-year battle with cancer. He did not seek the limelight, but made an impact on so many people.

Lou is best described by those whose lives he touched:

"Few people have been as gracious in personality and kind in character as Lou Skurcenski. His persistent optimism even under severe physical difficulties showed his deep faith in God and love of life. He was a rare blend of intellectual ability and athletic talent. A credit to his teammates on the court, his colleagues at work and his neighbors and friends, and the pride of his wife and family, he has earned a permanent place in the memory of all of us. Lou was a true winner in the game of life, and his strength of character touched deeply all those privileged to know him."

"I fondly remember Lou's desk as the community center of our work group. We gathered there during lunch. Lou always found the positive in every situation. His humorous commentary on current events and infectious laughter was the magnet for these meetings."

"Lou was a true champion....as an athlete, citizen, coworker, husband, father, and friend. His optimism and good humor brightened our lives. His kindness and consideration for others reminded us that we are here to care for one another. His integrity and abiding faith continue to inspire us."

Lou's college chemistry professor wrote: "I admit that there were students over the years with whom I felt a special bond.... Lou Skurcenski was one of those. Of course, I admired his athletic prowess, which was apparent to all, although he was never a flashy player. He was so smooth in his playing that he would lull opponents and fans alike to neglect him, opponents to their dismay and fans to suddenly realize that he was the basis of the team's success. Much as I admired Lou for that considerable ability on the basketball court, it was his attitude and commitment in general that impressed me most. In the classroom he was always the listener and

thinker.... It was a privilege to know him.”

Finally, a fan who followed the Titans in the 1960's wrote: “The teams that Lou were on at Westminster were overstocked with characters, large in talent and personality. What distinguished Lou and drew everyone to him was his way of so gently, so quietly appreciating everyone else. He was a steady presence, the man in the middle who fused the distinctive styles of the other players. He was the great soul of permission, affirming and celebrating what made each other player exceptional both on and off the court. He laughed. He stood back. He let everyone have the spotlight. And yet without him, none would have had the spotlight. At the end of the game, there was Lou's predictable number of points, rebounds, steals, assists. Steady. Not one twitch of flash and dash, but everyone on the team and everyone who followed the team and everyone who understood the game, knew that the team was a great team because of this steady, unassuming, calming, yet fiercely determined and competitive center. Yes, he was truly THE center—of it all. It was not a misnomer that he was christened with the nickname “Squeaks.” That's about all one would hear from him. But those few and far between squeaks got the wheel of a team's attention. We know that his was an influence that has taken up permanent residence in the hearts of his teammates and all who knew him. He was a gift.”

New Scholarship offered at BHS this year

Lou Skurcenski Memorial Student/Athlete Scholarship founded

Special to the E-E

Back in 1964, a young college graduate at 21 and a newly-planted "Okie," Lou Skurcenski probably never imagined a college scholarship would be named for him at Bartlesville High School. But this scholarship is now becoming a reality, thanks to friends and family of "Big Lou." The first annual "Lou Skurcenski Memorial Student/Athlete Scholarship" will be awarded at the High School Awards Ceremony on May 19.

Donations are currently being accepted for the scholarship fund. Additionally, a fund-raising golf tournament is scheduled for May 20, at Adams Municipal Golf Course in Bartlesville. Preceding the tournament, a barbecue will be held at Woolaroc Museum and Wildlife Preserve on Friday evening, May 19.

Skurcenski was a key member of the Westminster College (PA) Titans basketball team which was named best small college team in the country in 1962. Following graduation, he accepted a position in Research and Development with Phillips Petroleum Company in Bartlesville and also joined the famous Phillips 66ers. He played with the team until it disbanded in 1968.

Skurcenski's love of children and his desire to offer encouragement was evident

even as he reached success as an athlete. Dave Schreckengost, one of his Westminster teammates, recalled that during a 1962 Good-Will Tour, Skurcenski was "worshipped" throughout South America.

"He was the tallest player on our team and with the South American people being of such small stature, the children virtually mobbed him everywhere we went. This was when I saw the love for children being displayed by him every day," Schreckengost said. "He'd always have a piece of gum or a trinket to hand to as many as possible. He'd always take the time to shake their hands and visit with them. He'd joke with the bus driver. He always did it with a smile and a sense of humor."

The six-week Goodwill Tour was sponsored by the U. S. State Department and the Amateur Athletic Union. The Westminster Titans and Grandbling Tigers combined to form two teams and played against South American basketball teams in seven countries.

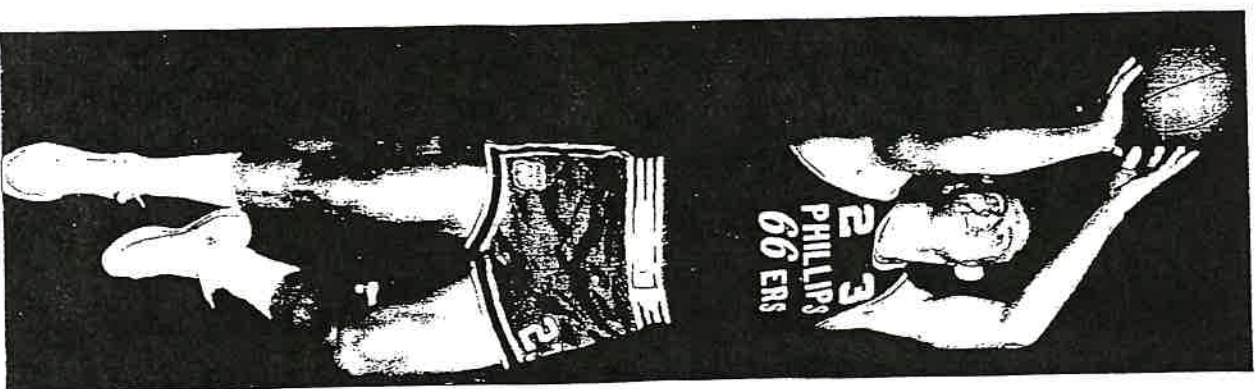
Schreckengost also commended Skurcenski's efforts as a team player.

"He could have scored twice as many points as he did, but he was a team player. He was a somewhat private person, content to be playing the game he loved and being with the woman that he treasured."

Skurcenski's career with Phillips lasted until his early retirement in 1997. He died in December 1998 following

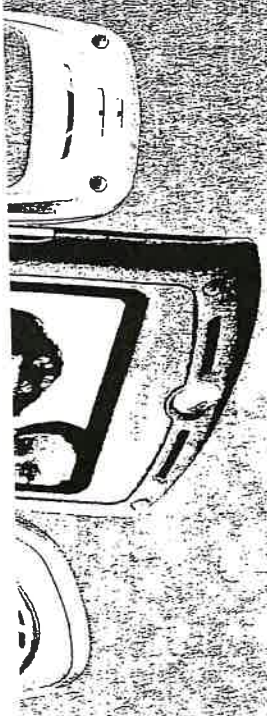
a lengthy battle with cancer. During his life, he coached numerous youth athletic teams and also gave his time as a tutor, mentor and friend to countless kids. His family thought it fitting to remember his love of youth with a scholarship in his honor.

To enter the golf tournament (\$75) and/or attend the barbecue at Woolaroc (\$25), mail name, address, and checks to Lou Skurcenski Memorial Scholarship, P.O. Box 3322, Bartlesville, OK 74006. Checks should be made to "Bartlesville Community Foundation" and Lou Skurcenski Scholarship on memo line. More information and entry forms are also available at Adams, Sunset, and Hillcrest golf courses.



Lou Skurcenski in 1960s

Three great phones
One tough choice



Skurcenski Stars in Olympic Trials

By Louis SKURCENSKI '64

I left for Kansas City on Saturday morning, Mar. 21, a bit apprehensive about what to expect and determined to succeed in what I was about to do. I had been chosen, along with 20 other college basketball players, as a member of the NALIA Olympic Basketball Tryout team. I was asked to report to Kansas City for a week's tryout for the 12-member NALIA team which would represent the 400 small colleges of the organization in the Olympic team trials in New York on April 2-4.



Skurcenski

I left from Youngstown airport and flew to Chicago and while waiting for my next flight I walked around the lobby. As I passed a food counter some of my previous apprehensions were realized. I saw a tall, boy carrying a hand satchel. He was about 6'9" tall and I knew he had to be going somewhere to play basketball. I walked over and introduced myself and, sure enough, he too was going to Kansas City.

I had expected the competition to be tough in Kansas City and the first player I met was 6'9". His name was Fernie Brock of Virginia State College, and I remembered that he had been the leading rebounder in the country among small colleges.

We boarded the plane together and flew from Chicago to Kansas City. We were met there and taken to Rockhurst College where we would be living and practicing during the week.

The next player I met was Willie Shaw of Lane College Tenn, who had led the country in scoring with a 40 p.p.g. average. He was only 6' tall but I kept thinking about his average. Most of the other players had arrived and after being introduced, we went to the college cafeteria for dinner. The food at Rockhurst during the week was very good, and I will never forget 6'10" Lucious Jackson of Pan-American College, Tex., eating 24 hamburgers at one sitting.

After dinner most of the players de-

clined to go into downtown Kansas City to try to get tickets for the NCAA final game that was being played there that night. We went in and, even though the game had been a sellout for two weeks, were able to get tickets. John McLendon of Kentucky State College, who was our coach during the trials, told us to watch closely because some of the players would undoubtedly be playing against us in New York the following week.

We started our three-day practice schedule Monday morning and each day's session became harder as the coaches constantly emphasized getting into top-notch physical condition. The games we would be playing would be conducted under International Rules, which require a team to shoot the ball within 30 seconds after gaining possession. This was a far cry from the possession-type, ball control offense I had been taught under coach Buzz Riddl at Westminster.

We had a practice scrimmage every night starting Wednesday and the coaches began making team cuts. Rockhurst had won the NALIA Tournament in Kansas City the previous week and basketball was still at a fever pitch on campus. We had large crowds for our scrimmage games and some students even attended our morning and afternoon practice sessions.

As players were cut and given their plane tickets back home, I couldn't help but wonder if the next night I would be the one to go.

Finally Saturday came and the last scrimmage and player cut. You can't imagine how excited and happy I was when I found out I had made the team and would be flying to New York the next day for the Olympic Team trials.

Upon arriving in New York we went to Garden City where we would be staying during the week. We weren't scheduled to play until Thursday. We practiced at Adelphi College Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.

The team trials were set up in a round-robin tournament with three teams from the NCAA, two from the armed services, two from the AAU, and one from the NALIA. The emphasis in the games was to

be on individual performances rather than a team's so the 20 judges could pick a strong team to represent the U.S. in Tokyo.

We had Wednesday afternoon off from practice for a tour of New York City. We went by bus to all the main sights and rode through the World's Fair which opened in April.

My roommate in New York was Jesse Branson of Elon College, N.C., a purely southern boy with a drawl a yard long. He definitely had trouble with it when talking to the native New Yorkers, who have a slang all their own.

Our games were held at St. John's U. with our first game against a strong AAU team composed primarily of players from the Phillips Petroleum Co. of Bartlesville, Okla. We defeated them 77-74 in a very exciting game, and then started getting ready for our next game.

The next night we met an NCAA team composed of players from the larger universities across the country and lost 66-85. Their team included such known players as Jeff Mullins, Duke, Bill Bradley, Princeton; Mel Counts, Arizona State; and Dave Stallworth, Wichita.

Our next game on Saturday night was for third place in the tournament and against another NCAA all-star team. We won this game 84-77 playing our best game against such NCAA stars as Paul Silas, Creighton; Ron Bonham, Cincinnati; Cotton Nash, Kentucky; and Gazzie Russell, Michigan.

One of our players, Jackson, of Pan-American was picked as a member of the Olympic Team because of his outstanding play during the week. Others named to the squad included Barnes, Texas Western; Bradley, Princeton; Brown, Goodyear; Caldwell, Arizona State; Counts, Oregon State; Davies, Goodyear; Hazzard, UCLA; McCaffrey, Goodyear; Mullins, Duke; Shipp, Phillips; and Wilson, Cincinnati U.

Although I was not picked as a member of the final Olympic team, I feel the experiences I had during the two weeks were very rewarding and a thrill I will never forget.

Editor's Note: Modest Skurcenski neglected to mention that he started in his team's win over the NCAA Whites for third place. The 6-6 Titan senior from Zelenople scored 22 points and paced the NALIA in assists.

Before 1992,
U.S. basketball
players were
chosen from
amateur ranks.
It was a huge
accomplishment
to be one of
20 to try out
for 12-member
NALIA Team.
I was privileged
to watch the
Olympic Trials
in New York.
The competition
was fierce.
After reading
this article,
you will learn
more about
his talents,
hard work,
and determination.

Stephanie
Skurcenski

Former 66er stalwart just missed making '64 Olympic team

By Mike Tupa

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Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton were still on their honeymoon and American airwaves were inundated with sprightly Beatles tunes — ranging from “Can’t Buy Me Love” to “She Loves You” to “Twist and Shout” — when a muscular, lanky basketball player name Lou Skurcenski closed in on his Olympic dream.

Although he fell just short of qualifying for the U.S. men’s basketball team, Skurcenski still emerged a winner.

His strong performance in the Olympic trials attracted a representative of the Phillips 66ers.

And that contact opened the door for Skurcenski and his wife Stephanie to move to Bartlesville, where they made a happy home.

Playing for the 66ers, from 1964 through 1967, Skurcenski settled into his career as an analytical chemist with Phillips.

He died in 1998 — in his 55th year of age and just 34 years after he made his bid for the Olympics.

The year 1964 was a time to remember...

Known simply as “Big Lou,” the 6-foot-6 Westminster (Pa.) College Titan center — armed with a shy



Then future Phillips 66ers basketball player Lou Skurcenski, middle, poses with Westminster (Pa.) College teammates prior to a goodwill tour in the early 1960s, to South America. In 1964, Skurcenski would just miss out on qualifying for the 1964 U.S. Men’s Olympic Basketball team. He would be hired later that year by Phillips Petroleum and play several years for the Phillips 66ers. Following his death in 1998, the Lou Skurcenski Memorial Scholarship Fund was established at Westminster College.

SKURCENSKI: Former Phillips 66er player left impressive

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smile, a sweet shooting touch and rugged rebounding work ethic — first had to earn a spot on the NAIA All-Star team that would play in the 1964 Olympic trials.

Twenty of the nation's best NAIA players of 1964, including Skurcenski — who had scored 1,182 points in 100 career games, and made more than 60 percent of his field goals, for the Westminster Titans — gathered in Kansas City for the tryouts to make the 12-man roster for the a NAIA All-Star team that would compete in the Olympic Trials.

"He had been playing basketball all year," said Stephanie Skurcenski, who was engaged to Lou at the time of the NAIA tryout and Olympic Trials. "He spent five days out there (in Kansas City)."

The easy-going but fierce warrior Skurcenski landed a coveted spot on the NAIA Greens team.

Among his teammates were future NBA legend Willis Reed (Grambling University) and future NBA All-Star Lucious Jackson (Pan American).

It was then off to New York for the Olympic Trials, which also consisted of teams representing the best NCAA, military services and AAU players.

One of the AAU athletes was Jerry Shipp of the Phillips 66ers.

Shipp and Jackson would make the Olympic team cut; Skurcenski and Reed would not.

Shipp and his Olympic teams would go on and win the gold medal at the '64 Olympics, hosted by Japan, held in October. The U.S. team would register a 9-0 record, including a 73-59 victory in the gold medal game against the Soviet Union.

Reed would go on and lead the New York Knicks to the NBA title in 1970 and 1973,

and to be named the finals MVP both times.

Skurcenski would move to Bartlesville.

But, he never bemoaned his non-Olympic fate, according to his wife.

"For as many years as I knew him, he truly had no regrets," Stephanie said. "I was dating him at the time and we were good buddies. He just didn't complain about things. He was thankful for what he was able to do."

In a letter years later to Stephanie, one of Lou's friends gave an insight to the personality of Skurcenski, when they went on a business trip together.

"I really, really enjoyed watching Lou's enjoyment of moment," the friend wrote. "Lou's stopping to interact with our fellow human life travelers taught me a lot. ... I looked forward to our lunch breaks every day. Lou would hold court. He would literally entertain us troops with stories, jokes and quizzes."

Skurcenski was a lifetime fan of people.

In an autobiographical article written for a publication about his Olympic Trials experience, Skurcenski marveled about Jackson consuming 24 hamburgers at one sitting, during the stay in Kansas City.

But, there also was the serious business of qualifying for the NAIA All-Star team that would compete in New York City.

Skurcenski had to adjust to the 30-second time clock after having played a no-clock, slowdown style game at Westminster.

"We had a practice scrimmage every night...and the coaches began making team stats," Skurcenski wrote.

"We had large crowds for our scrimmage games and some students even attended our morning and afternoon prac-

tice sessions."

When the five-day odyssey ended, Skurcenski survived the cut.

He was headed to the Big Apple.

"You can't imagine how happy and excited I was," he wrote.

During the Olympic Trials tournament that followed, Skurcenski would play against such notable players as Bill Bradley, Jeff Mullins, Mel Counts, Paul Silas, Cotton Nash, Cazzie Russell and others. *

In his unassuming way, Skurcenski relished the fire of basketball fire as much as he loved people.

On April 4, 1964, he led the NAIA team against the NCAA Whites, in the fieldhouse at St. John's University.

Skurcenski turned a double-double, with 22 points and 10 rebounds, in the 84-77 victory against the NCAA Whites, who roster included Joe Caldwell, Bill Cunningham, Nash, Russell and Silas.

Skurcenski nailed 7-of-12 from the field and 8-of-12 from the free throw stripe, and also dished out two assists.

Cecil Tuttle and Jackson scored 16 and 14 points, respectively.

Reed made just 3-of-13 from the field on his way to a nine-point, 12-rebound performance.

Skurcenski came up big in crunch time, scoring six points the final 3:47, including a driving layup that put the NAIA ahead, 78-72, with 1:31 left.

Despite his big-time performance that game, Skurcenski would not make the U.S. team.

He would be picked in the fifth round (by Philadelphia) in the 1964 NBA draft.

But, Skurcenski sought for a more stable future for he and his new bride.

Due to the encouragement at the Olympic Trials of a

legacy of caring

66ers representative, he wrote Phillips Petroleum requesting a tryout with the team and for a job.

Skurcenski played at least three seasons (64-65, 65-66 and 66-67) with the 66ers. He's not shown in the team photo for the team's last-ever season of 67-68, although one publication lists him playing in 1968.

But, he and his wife found a home in Bartlesville, where they raised their two children.

Skurcenski also became involved in youth sports and remained a local sports icon.

He was named the Honorary Coach for Bartlesville High School's team during the 1992 66ers Annual Holiday Basketball Classic, held in Bartlesville.

Skurcenski passed away six years later, but he continues to give back to the community through the Lou Skurcenski Memorial Scholarship fund.

As for Stephanie Skurcenski, the memories of Lou remain tender and laced with gratitude — no time more so than every four years when a new team of U.S. hoop greats is put together for the Olympic games.

No, Lou Skurcenski never enjoyed his chance to bring home a gold medal.

But, he spent a lifetime providing golden memories for those around him, whether they were loved ones, friends or strangers.

In the same letter mentioned above, the friend wrote when he was with Skurcenski, "I learned how to travel relaxed. Lou had conversations with the car rental agent, the hotel clerks and gas station attendants. It seemed he was collecting these encounters with people in a library of experiences."

When it came to loving life and caring about others, it seems Skurcenski was in a gold medal class all by himself.