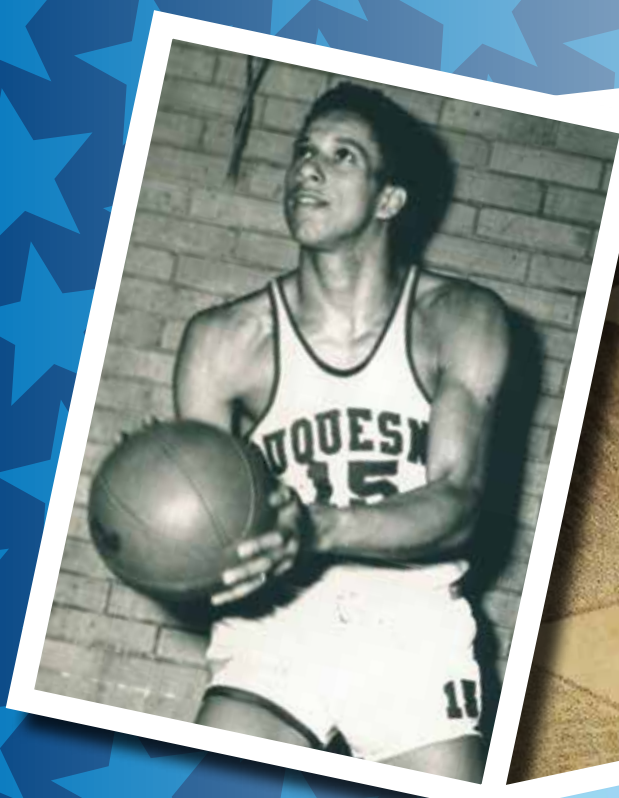


A Famed Hall and a Hall of Famer



Basketball is as much sound as it is the fury of motion. The rhythmic smacks on the wooden floor, the thumps of the backboard, and frequent net swooshes and familiar squeaks of shoes chirping across the pristine floor during pre-game warmups. This sonic array christened Duquesne's new UPMC Cooper Fieldhouse, home to future basketball and volleyball competitions and the training hub for all of our athletes. With a men's basketball victory over Dayton on Feb. 2, 2021, the new facility, located on the site of the former A.J. Palumbo Center, was reborn as the epicenter for Duquesne University Athletics.

HERE'S A CLOSER LOOK AT CHUCK COOPER, THE NAMESAKE OF DUQUESNE'S NEWEST ON-CAMPUS, FIELDHOUSE JEWEL.

THE MOMENT

"I don't give a damn if he's striped or plaid or polka-dot, Boston takes Charles Cooper of Duquesne!" were the history-making words of Boston Celtics owner Walter Brown when he chose Chuck Cooper with the 13th pick (second round) of the National Basketball Association Draft April 25, 1950, making the Duquesne alumnus the first African American player drafted by an NBA team.

Cooper, who was inducted to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2019, was one of three African American players who made an indelible impact on the NBA in 1950-1951 along with Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton and Earl Lloyd. Clifton, the first African American to sign an NBA contract, and Lloyd, the first African American to appear in an NBA game—he took the floor one day before Cooper—were inducted to the Hall of Fame in 2014 and 2008, respectively.

"I truly believe that if Chuck had not been taken in the second round, which is a monumental thing, I would not have been taken," said Lloyd, 1950 ninth-round draft pick of the Washington Capitols.

THE PLAYER

A graduate of Pittsburgh's Westinghouse High School, Cooper began his college career at West Virginia State, where he averaged over 20 points per game before entering the Navy during World War II.

Following an honorable discharge, he enrolled at Duquesne before the 1946-1947 season. A consensus Second Team All-American as a senior, Cooper led the Dukes to a 78-19 record and a pair of National Invitation Tournament appearances, when the NIT was considered college basketball's true national championship. He captained a 1949-1950 squad that finished with a 23-6 record and No. 6 (AP) national ranking.

Three NBA teams (New York, Rochester and Chicago) as well as the Harlem Globetrotters tried to sign him after his junior year at Duquesne.

Cooper, who was under consideration for NBA Rookie of the Year following his first season in Boston, had a six-year NBA career. Known as a shutdown defender and top rebounder, Cooper often drew the opposing team's top offensive player, regardless of size.

"It turned out he was not only a fine player, but also a sensitive, intelligent guy who handled his pain with class and dignity."

"The Celtics chose Chuck Cooper for one simple reason: He was the best player they could get at that point in the draft. Race was not an issue with Arnold (Celtics head coach Red Auerbach); winning, however, was. It turned out he was not only a fine player, but also a sensitive, intelligent guy who handled his pain with class and dignity," said 1971 Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame inductee Bob Cousy.

THE REALITY OF RACISM

A capacity crowd of 2,600 squeezed into McKeesport High School for Duquesne's much-anticipated match-up with Tennessee Dec. 23, 1946, when, according to Jack Sell's front-page story in the next day's Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: "About 15 minutes before Coach Chick Davies' Bluff-ite cagers were to take the floor against Coach John W. Maurer's University of Tennessee Volunteers in a feature intersectional struggle on the McKeesport Vocational High School court, the contest was wiped off the schedule because the visitors from Knoxville, Tennessee refused to compete unless assured that Charles Cooper, freshman Negro cager from Westinghouse High, would not be allowed to play."

Davies, honoring the stand of Duquesne's administration, refused to yield to Maurer's refusal to send his team on the floor.

Judge Sammy Weiss, acting chair of the Duquesne athletic committee, addressed the disappointed fans on hand: "Speaking as a Duquesne Athletic Council official, I insist that no player be barred from this game by reason of race, color or creed. The principle of the entire matter means more to us than a mere basketball game."

Cooper told his teammates he would not be offended if they played without him. The players immediately took the stand that they did not wish to play unless he was in the lineup.

"I can't say but so much about this," said Cooper. "I appreciate the position taken by my coach and Judge Weiss. I am glad that they refused to compromise with Tennessee, although I would have stepped aside rather than disappoint all those people who turned out to see the game. You can say, however, that I am glad and



The newly renovated UPMC Cooper Fieldhouse opened in February 2021 and was named in honor of Duquesne alumnus, Charles “Chuck” Cooper, the first African-American to be drafted into the NBA. Cooper’s son, Chuck Cooper III, participated in a small ceremony in April placing the historical landmark designation outside the facility.

proud that I am a student at Duquesne and a member of the basketball team.”

Said Duquesne’s legendary African American trainer Bruce Jackson, “I appreciate the pressure on all of you. I wish to say—speaking both for myself and Cooper—that Duquesne is to be congratulated on its stand.”

“We went to check into a hotel room where we were going to play that night and they weren’t going to allow Chuck to stay with us. It was a moment in time where you are standing with a close friend and you’re embarrassed for the world. You just don’t know what to say. You don’t know how to explain that type of overt stupidity. To this day I’m offended by it,” said Bob Cousy, Chuck Cooper’s roommate with the Celtics

THE IMPACT

Cooper, who was enshrined in the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame Sept. 6, 2019, was represented by his son Chuck III at the festivities in Springfield, Mass., Cooper was presented onstage by a virtual who’s who of NBA greats pictured below (L-R): Bill Russell (‘75), Tom Heinsohn (‘86), Ray Allen (‘18), Dominique Wilkins (‘06), Elgin Baylor (‘77), Kareem Abdul Jabbar (‘95), Chuck Cooper III, emcee Ahmad Rashad, Mannie Jackson (‘17), Julius Erving (‘93), Larry Bird (‘98) and Isiah Thomas (‘00). Two months later—a full 44 years after being inducted into the Hall of Fame—Russell, the first African American elected in 1975, accepted his Hall of Fame ring. The Celtics great didn’t attend the



ceremony in 1975, citing “his own personal reasons.” Said Russell in a Nov. 15, 2019 tweet: “In ‘75 I refused being the first black player to go into the (Hall of Fame). I felt others before me should have that honor. Good to see progress; ChuckCooperHOF19 @NBA.”

“When the NBA started it was segregated. By Chuck Cooper being drafted, it was the ownership of the NBA saying that ‘we can accept integration of the NBA,’” Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Class of 1995, said.

“He overcame the barriers of that time and he created a legacy that we benefited from,” said Chet Walker, Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Class of 2012.

AFTER BASKETBALL

Cooper was a trailblazer off the court as well. After earning his master’s degree in social work from the University of Minnesota in 1960, he became the first African American department head in the city of Pittsburgh when was named the director of the Department of Parks and Recreation by Mayor Pete Flaherty in 1970. A couple of years later, he became the urban affairs officer for Pittsburgh National Bank (PNB), the predecessor of PNC Bank. At PNB, his impact was so impressive that over 40 years later, people are still inspired by what he did for the community. Cooper passed away at the age of 57 in February 1984.

“He was a selfless individual who was very easy to meet, and his agenda was always for the people of the community, not for him. I think one of the things you’re trying to do is give visibility to a person who really didn’t draw visibility to himself. To some extent that’s why he was so successful because he built relationships and worked as a teammate. It wasn’t about him. It was about the bank and it was about the community,” said Jim Rohr, former chairman and CEO of PNC. ♦