LEONARD ROBERT “LENNIE” ROSENBLUTH, SMA ’53

Lennie Rosenbluth, born on January 22, 1933, in New York City, was a standout in basketball at Staunton Military Academy in 1953 leading the Hilltoppers to a remarkable 17 – 1 season. Their only loss was in the first game of the season to the University of Virginia freshmen 71 to 69. SMA turned the tables on UVA in the final game of the year, however, with a triumphant 89 to 80 win. Then, when Lennie attended the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, he really stood out as a leader of the UNC basketball team from 1954, on the freshman team, through 1957.

“Watershed events often are recognized only in hindsight when the passage of time reveals that something really special happened way back when. Today, sports fans know that ‘something really special’ occurred in the spring of 1957 when the North Carolina Tar Heels capped a perfect 32-0 season by defeating the Kansas Jayhawks to win the NCAA basketball championship.

“That magical season catapulted college basketball ahead of football as the No. 1 sport in the state in the minds of many North Carolinians. It raised the credibility of the Atlantic Coast Conference throughout the nation. It spawned an immediate avalanche of TV coverage of games throughout the conference. Before 1957 the ACC and Dixie Classic tournaments were the highlights of the season; afterward the NCAA Tournament took precedence. Although others played important roles, the principal figure in this upheaval was a Jewish kid from New York named Leonard Robert ‘Lennie’ Rosenbluth.”

Lennie Rosenbluth remembers darkness and silence at the championship game of the 1957 NCAA Tournament at the University of Kansas. He couldn’t do anything about the darkness. Municipal Auditorium was – still is – poorly lit, full of corners and angles, even more so back in 1957. The silence had everything to do with Rosenbluth and North Carolina. Despite the University of Kansas Jayhawks’ home-court advantage, it was quiet at the start and quiet at the finish, after Joe Quigg hit two free throws to seal the 54-53 win in triple overtime.

“The unusual part of it was how quiet the crowd was,” said Rosenbluth. “[5-foot-10] Tommy Kearns went to jump center against Chamberlain, and there was a hush over the crowd. We opened up with a fast flurry of points and we were up 10 or 12 before they could turn around. The crowd was out of it for ninetenths of the game. Once we won the game, you could hear a pin drop in the stadium, in Municipal
Auditorium. It was so quiet. We were the only ones that were cheering. People filed out so quickly you couldn’t believe it.”

A 6-foot-5 forward, Lennie Rosenbluth, scored 20 points in the 54-53 championship game victory over the Wilt Chamberlain-led Jayhawks. He was also the NCAA tournament’s overall top scorer, averaging 28 points per game.

Rosenbluth had averaged 27.9 points and 8.6 rebounds per game during the regular season and the Helms Hall of Fame named him Collegiate Player of the Year over Chamberlain. In addition to being a consensus first-team All-American in 1957, he was honored as NCAA National Player of the Year, the ACC Player of the Year and its Athlete of the Year. In fact, he was named to the All-ACC team in all three years of his college varsity playing eligibility, having averaged 25.5 points (and 11.7 rebounds) per game as a sophomore and 26.7 points per game as a junior.

In 2002, the ACC selected Rosenbluth to its 50th anniversary basketball team and named him one of the 50 greatest athletes in the history of the conference. He was selected to the All-Decade Final Four team for the 1950s. In addition to being in the Helms College Basketball Hall of Fame, he was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, the New York City Basketball Hall of Fame, and the Staunton Military Academy Hall of Fame. He holds a number of UNC records, including most points in a single season (895) and highest single season average (28.0) in a career that preceded the 3-point shot.

Following his college career he had a brief stint with the professional Philadelphia Warriors after being drafted in the first round. But he had to play behind star Paul Arizin, which meant he played hardly at all. He was only making about $5,000 a year, having no fun, and it just wasn’t worth it anymore. He and Pat, whom he married in 1957, came back to Chapel Hill. He sold insurance while he was getting his teaching certificate. After being certified, his first job was teaching American history and coaching the basketball team at Fike High School in Wilson, NC, east of Raleigh. “My first year, we had a perfect season again, except we lost every game,” Lennie says with a laugh.

Later, Lennie and Pat moved to Florida where he coached high school basketball and taught American history for 35 years. When Pat, with whom he had a son and a daughter during a 53-year marriage, was stricken with cancer, the Rosenbluths moved back to North Carolina so she could be treated at the Lineberger Cancer Center at UNC Hospitals. She died in 2010. Rosenbluth remarried and now lives in Chapel Hill with his present wife, the former Dianne Stabler.

“Rosenbluth is regarded by many as one of the 100 greatest college basketball players of all time. Until Duke University's Christian Laettner, Rosenbluth was the only collegian to be named NCAA National Player of the Year, ACC Player of the Year, ACC Tournament MVP, and NCAA regional MVP in the same season. A 6-foot, 5-inch forward from The Bronx, New York, Lennie was one the greatest players in North Carolina history. He was the undisputed team leader, with tremendous all-around skills. Whether it was a needed basket or rebound, he was the man everyone looked to when the game was on the line. There was never a better clutch performer than Lennie Rosenbluth. Lennie was as smooth as glass. There was never a herky-jerky movement. He was the master of the catch-and-shoot play, executing from beginning to end in one fluid motion.

“Lennie had an incredibly soft touch that translated to every shot in his repertoire, whether it was his deadly outside 1-hander, or twirling through the lane with his majestic hook. His jump shots were almost unstoppable, always released at the very top of his jump.
“And even though he was a phenomenal marksman from anywhere on the floor, he very seldom took a poor shot, or a low percentage shot. And he very seldom missed. Lennie once said that when he was on his game the hoop looked like a bathtub to him.

“One of his greatest assets was his poise, the ease with which he did his stuff on the basketball court. He was the epitome of the "cool customer." He never seemed to rattle or feel pressure. He was always under control, and kept the game under control.

“His confidence infused his teammates. They knew he could score almost at will, so they played better and without pressure. With every opponent concentrating on stopping Lennie, his teammates were able to play a loose and free-wheeling game.

“Of course, Lennie played that way all the time, no matter what the situation. “


All Edits in this biography by Kelly McGavock, SMA ’59

Lennie Rosenbluth with UNC coach Frank McGuire

For more information about Lennie Rosenbluth's life and legend, go to: www.chapelhillmagazine.com/personalities/class-of-%2757/