



KENNY THOMAS - NBA BASKETBALL PROFESIONAL

Longtime high school basketball fans have no trouble recalling some intense hardwood matchups between coach Jim Hulsman's Albuquerque High Bulldogs and coach Frank Castillo's La Cueva Bears in the 1994-95 season.

Hulsman had the services of a big kid named Kenny Thomas, while Castillo had a future NBA player of his own, A.J. Bramlett, who'd later be at the University of Arizona to help the Wildcats win the NCAA championship in 1997.

After moving from El Paso to the Duke City, Thomas played his senior season (1994-95) for the Bulldogs, averaging 25.2 points and 16.9 rebounds a game. That helped the Bulldogs compile a 22-3 record and the Class AAAA state title. Parade Magazine named Thomas an All-American.

Those Thomas-Bramlett meetings in the 1994-95 season were legendary, and still talked about today.

To refresh your memory: Thomas scored a game-high 29 points and Bramlett had 18 in the first District 2AAAA meeting of the season at Albuquerque High. meeting at La Cueva, playing for the top seed in the district tournament, Bramlett led all scorers with 25 points, only to see his Bears come out on the short end again; Damien Jenkins paced AHS with 25 points and Thomas had 21 in the Bulldogs' win.

The biggest game for the teams was the 2AAAA title tilt, with Thomas going off for 29 points and Bramlett notching 30 at Bulldog City in LCHS's 78-77 thrilling win in overtime.

Thomas went on to have games with 31, 16 and 22 points in the Bulldogs' path to the state title, in wins over Hobbs, Mayfield and Clovis; Bramlett and the Bears were one-and-done, falling to Alamogordo in the quarterfinals.

By season's end, Thomas had left his mark in the Bulldogs' annals, averaging 25 points and 16.3 rebounds per game. AHS coach Jim Hulsman, who knows a little something about the game (660 wins at AHS and a New Mexico Sports Hall of Fame member) touted Thomas as "a good student, a fine team leader and an excellent basketball player."

Thomas's first college game was in the same place as his last game with Albuquerque High: in The Pit.

His days as a Lobo were memorable. Just ask members of Lobo Nation, or the Red Menace, who can probably recite their best Kenny Thomas tidbits: first player in the history of the Western Athletic Conference to surpass 1,800 points, 1,000 rebounds and 200 blocked shots; All-America honors following his junior season by Basketball Times; and all-conference selection three times and a member of the all-WAC defensive team his final two seasons.

In his four seasons as a Lobo, where he still ranks as the second all-time leading scorer, UNM enjoyed its best four-year mark in school history with Thomas, compiling a 102-30 record from 1995-98, including a 71-3 ledger in The Pit. Thomas, who wore number 4, led UNM to the championship game of the WAC Tournament three times and was named most valuable player as a freshman in 1996. His career scoring high was 31 points on two occasions, while his best rebounding effort was 18 against New Hampshire.

And, as many fans proudly note when recalling the past, UNM advanced to the second round of the NCAA Tournament an unprecedented four straight years during Thomas's tenure here. To nobody's surprise, Thomas was a first-round pick, the 22nd player taken overall, of the Houston Rockets in the 1999 draft. As a rookie in the 1999-2000 season, Kenny led the Rockets in rebounding and was consistently among the team leaders in rebounds and blocked shots.

He played with the Rockets, where Charles Barkley and Hakeem Olajuwon were teammates, until they traded him to Philadelphia in the 2002-03 season. In the 2003-04 season, he was one of just 11 players to average a double-double.

He concluded his 11-year career as a member of the Sacramento Kings, with career professional averages of 9.3 points and 6.9 rebounds per game. He since has been active in charity work, here in Albuquerque and in Houston.