



CHARLIE CRISS

written by Ken Sickenger

As a 5-foot-8 basketball player, Charlie Criss always had to prove he belonged. At the end of the day, he was always up to the task.

Charlie did it the hard way in both the college and professional ranks on his way to induction in the New Mexico Sports Hall of Fame. He helped lead New Mexico State to a Final Four appearance – only after a year of junior college ball. He later went on to play eight seasons in the NBA – only after grinding through four years in the Eastern Basketball League.

Though short in stature by college and professional basketball standards, Charlie was never short on determination. He doggedly pursued his dream of playing in the NBA and left a trail of individual and team success everywhere he went.

Asked later about his fondest memory of playing for the NBA's Atlanta Hawks, San Diego Clippers, and Milwaukee Bucks, Criss recalled the struggle he endured to get there.

"My fondest memory of playing in the league was just making it," he told the New York Times. "After all the time I spent trying to get there and not getting an opportunity, I finally made it."

A native of Valhalla, New York, Charlie put up dazzling high school numbers in his home state, averaging 25 points per game and leading Gorton High to a state championship as tournament MVP. Still, he did not immediately grab the eye of Division I coaches and ended up starting his college basketball career in Hobbs at New Mexico Junior College.

NMJC proved to be an ideal springboard. Charlie averaged 29.6 points per game in his lone season there, racking up 47- and 42-point games along the way. He earned All-Region honors – and caught the attention of then-New Mexico State coach Lou Henson, who brought Charlie to Las Cruces for the 1967-68 season. He

immediately became a starter and averaged 16 points per game as a sophomore but was forced to watch the Aggies' NCAA Tournament run because rules prohibited first-year JC transfers from playing in postseason.

Such was not the case for Charlie's final two seasons and he helped lift New Mexico State to new heights. He was named to the United Press International Small America Team after each season, but the high point undoubtedly came in 1969-70.

Teaming with standouts (and previous NMHOF inductees) Jimmy Collins and Sam Lacey, Charlie and the Aggies soared to a 27-3 record and earned NMSU first and only trip to the Final Four. The Aggies fell to then-powerhouse UCLA and coach John Wooden in the semifinals before defeating St. Bonaventure in the third-place game. Charlie was selected to the NCAA Midwest Regional All-Tournament Team.

Charlie's pro basketball career was a similar story. He excelled in the EBL, leading Hartford and Scranton to league championships, leading the league in scoring three times and picking up two league MVP honors.

It finally paid off in 1977, when Charlie caught on with the Atlanta Hawks. At 29, he was the NBA's oldest-ever rookie and, at 5-8, its shortest player for seven of his eight seasons. Nonetheless, Charlie would play 418 games in the league and averaged 8.5 points and 3.2 rebounds for his career.

After retiring, Charlie became a television commentator for the Atlanta Hawks, coached golf and basketball and later opened his own business, Charlie Criss Graphics.