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Hansen's Hundred, No. 38: Fat Lever led Pueblo to 2 state titles, was NBA star

Pueblo's Lever was NBA star

GREG HANSEN

Arizona Daily Star



Lafayette "Fat" Lever, star of Pueblo's 1977 and 1978 state championship and a two-time NBA All-Star speaks during an event at the school in 2019. Lever is one of the most accomplished high school players in Tucson History.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Pickup games at Bear Down Gym in the mid-1970s were often stacked with big-reputation guards: Eric Money, Russell Brown, Joe Nehls, Jim Rappis, Gary Harrison, Gilbert Myles and Randall Moore.

But little by little, a slightly built young man from Pueblo High School — everybody called him 'Fat' — turned heads as much as anyone.

When Lafayette 'Fat' Lever began his sophomore season at Pueblo in 1975-76, Warriors coach Roland LaVetter said: 'Fat is as good an all-around basketball player as anyone we'll face.'

Talk about an understatement.

For two years, 1976-77 and 1977-78, Fat Lever was probably the best high school basketball player in Arizona, leading Pueblo to back-to-back state championships, including a perfect 28-0 season in '78 that some consider the top year ever by a Tucson prep basketball team.

Lever, who is No. 38 on our list of Tucson's Top 100 Sports Figures of the last 100 years, got better. Much, much better.



Fat Lever protects the ball as Danny Ainge reaches in for it during a 1983 game between the Blazers and Celtics.

Peter Southwick, Associated Press

After leading Arizona State to a 16-2 Pac-10 record in 1980-81 — the Sun Devils were ranked No. 3 in the final AP poll — the all-conference point guard became a lottery pick for the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers, No. 11 overall, and twice made the NBA All-Star team, in 1988 and 1989.

He completed his NBA career in 1994 with 43 triple-doubles, then fifth in league history behind immortal players Oscar Robertson, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird and Wilt Chamberlain. In a 1989 game against Golden State, Lever had 23 assists, 13 rebounds and 15 points



MAMTA POPAT, ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Lafayette 'Fat' Lever, star of Pueblo's 1977 and 1978 state championships and a two-time NBA All-Star, speaks during an event at the school in 2019. Lever is one of the most accomplished high school players in Tucson history.

If you ask those who knew Lever during his Tucson days, the conversation steers not to his basketball accomplishments but his character.

When I met with LaVetter at his Tucson home two years ago, he said: 'I very seldom think of Fat as a basketball player. He is a beautiful human being.'

LaVetter said that when Lever graduated from PHS in the spring of 1978, he sent hand-written letters to each of his teachers, thanking them for preparing him for college.

Lever's emergence as an elite college basketball recruit has always led to the obvious questions: Why did he choose ASU over hometown UA?

Part of it was that Wildcats coach Fred Snowden did not aggressively pursue Lever, believing (1) his returning backcourt of underclassmen Joe Nehls and Russell Brown was good to go for the next two seasons, and (2) Snowden was put off that Lever didn't actively express his desire to be a Wildcat.

In the end, ASU's Ned Wulk and his assistants were able to win a recruiting battle against Colorado and San Diego State.

'I've known Fred since the seventh grade,' Lever told the Arizona Republic at the annual North-South All-Star Game in the summer of 1978. 'But I know him as a friend, not a coach. I wanted to keep it that way.'



The great Fat Lever led Pueblo High School past Rincon in the 1978 state championship game.

Jim Davis, Arizona Daily Star 1978

Lever's Sun Devils went 9-1 against Arizona.

Lever and his two brothers grew up in poverty in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, without a father in their lives. Their mother, Ruth, moved to Tucson in the late 1960s, while Fat remained in Arkansas, living with his grandparents. He moved to Tucson in 1970, living near Pueblo High School on east 31st Street.

His mother worked as a nurse's aide at Tucson Medical Center. He and his older brother, Anthony, became gym rats, spending summer days at the Boys and Girls Club and later at Bear Down Gym. Both became starters for LaVetter's powerhouse program at Pueblo. Anthony played at Eastern Arizona College.

After his NBA career ended in 1994, Lever spent seven years working for the Sacramento Kings, in player development and as the club's radio analyst. He has since been a consultant for the Denver Nuggets and is in private business in Phoenix.

As for Lever's legacy, Pueblo High School's main basketball facility is named Lafayette Lever Gymnasium. Four years ago, the Nuggets retired Lever's No. 12 jersey.

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PETER SOUTHWICK, ASSOCIATED PRESS

