

NO. 3 | SEAN ELLIOTT

With Each Basket, Elliott Became Local Icon

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Sean Elliott and the Arizona Wildcats celebrate the Elite Eight victory over North Carolina in Seattle in 1988.

CLARENCE TABB, TUCSON CITIZEN 1988

Late in the 1984 NBA season, rookie of the year Ralph Sampson flew to Tucson to complete a business deal and spend part of the afternoon playing basketball at the Tucson Athletic Club. Once Cholla High School junior Sean Elliott found out about Sampson's appearance, he, too, went to the gym, basketball in hand, and began taking jump shots on the opposite end of the court.

One of Elliott's jumpers bounced off the rim and rolled to Sampson, who picked it up and tossed it back to the awestruck Elliott. When asked about the encounter with the John Wooden Award winner and Adolph Rupp player of the year, Elliott said: 'It was amazing; he even touched my basketball.' Five years later, Elliott was the John Wooden Award winner and Adolph Rupp player of the year.

That summer, the under-the-radar Cholla Charger emerged as an elite prospect, becoming an all-star at the three biggest summer camps of the 1980s: the Five-Star Camp in Pennsylvania, the B/C Camp in Indiana and the Super Star Camp in Santa Barbara. Ranked No. 3 on our list of Tucson's Top 100 Sports Figures of the last 100 years, Elliott couldn't have had better timing. Or maybe it's that Arizona Coach Lute Olson's couldn't have had better timing. On Sept. 4, 1984, Elliott made a commitment to play for the Wildcats.

The Wildcats were a year removed from a 4-24 season. Olson was about to begin his second UA season; the Wildcats were picked to finish eighth in the Pac-10.

On Jan. 3, 1985, Olson drove to Sahuaro High School to watch Elliott and the Chargers play against Arizona prep powerhouse Sahuaro, coached by two-time state champion Dick McConnell. Elliott scored a school-record 48 points.

'He's a future All-American,' said McConnell. 'He's the best (Tucson) player I've ever seen. It was the most outstanding performance I've ever seen.' With Elliott, a freshman, in the UA lineup in 1986, the Wildcats won their first Pac-10 championship, clinching the historic victory at Pauley Pavilion. John Wooden sat behind the UCLA bench that night. Elliott scored 28 points. It wasn't the last time Elliott would break UCLA's basketball heart. On an unforgettable February afternoon at McKale Center, 1989, Elliott scored 35 points to break the Pac-10's career scoring record held by Kareem-Abdul Jabbar. Bruins coach Jim Harrick said 'Where do you get a player like Sean Elliott? I want one.' Olson added: 'Sean's the best big-game player I've ever seen.'

Elliott's jersey No. 32 was retired at McKale Center in 1996, a game in which his 1988

Final Four teammates Steve Kerr, Jud Buechler and Sean Rooks flew to Tucson for the game. But it might've been that the greatest game of Elliott's storybook- type career came on March 14, 2000, at the Alamodome in San Antonio.

Six months after undergoing a kidney transplant, Elliott, then 32, had worked his way back to health. The man whose 'Memorial Day Miracle' 3-pointer had led the San Antonio franchise to its first NBA championship a year earlier chose not to retire. He would become the first pro athlete to return to competition after a major organ transplant.

The Alamodome was abuzz that night. Normal capacity for a regular-season game was 20,000, but the Spurs admitted 26,807 fans that night. Many high-profile Tucsonans flew to Texas for the game, including auto dealer Jim Click, attorney Burt Kinerk, Judge Michael Brown and about 30 of Elliott's family members, including his mother, Odie Mae, a critical care nurse who had raised three boys as a single mother.

Early in the third quarter, Elliott drove into the paint and dunked over several Atlanta Hawks, including former Wildcat All-American Jason Terry.

The crowd stood and cheered so loudly, and for so long, that the game was stopped. Elliott was taken out of the game. 'Sean showed me more guts than I thought people had,' Terry told me that night in San Antonio. 'He looked pretty good with that dunk, didn't he?'

Elliott was a gifted student at Tolson Elementary School, and an even better athlete. He was a Little League baseball all-star who set a state age-group record in the long jump. He was the MVP of his youth soccer team. But at 13, growing to near 6 feet tall, Elliott was in the Cholla High School gymnasium one afternoon when he was greeted by Chargers basketball Coach Mel Karrle. 'He told me his best sport was soccer,' Karrle said. 'But once I got a look at

his body — he had very long arms — I said, 'Sean, you should consider playing basketball.'" He went on to score 10,544 points in the NBA and play in two All-Star Games. The Spurs retired his jersey, No. 32, in 2005. In 2018, Elliott was inducted into the College Basketball Hall of Fame. After working for ESPN and Fox Sports, Elliott is now the Spurs' radio and TV analyst.

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— Sahuaro High School coach Dick McConnell after a 48-point performance by Elliott in a Jan. 3, 1985 game between Cholla High School and Sahuaro High School



Sean Elliott dunks against Pitt during the 1989 Fiesta Classic at McKale Center.
ARIZONA DAILY STAR 1989



Cholla High School's Sean Elliott (32) battles on the boards against Sunnyside.
XAVIER GALLEGOS, TUCSON CITIZEN 1984

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