



JAMES LASSITER

"I'll do whatever it takes to win games, whether it's sitting on a bench waving a towel, handing a cup of water to a teammate, or hitting the game-winning shot."

-Kobe Bryant

The Lassiter name is synonymous in Freedom athletic lore with natural talent and love of sports. James Lassiter Jr., better known as Junior, graduated from Freedom in 1967 and excelled in three sports but is best remembered for his basketball prowess.

The oldest of the Lassiter family of seven sisters and two brothers, Lassiter was born in Americus, Georgia in 1947. James Sr. and Viola Lassiter headed north seeking better employment opportunities and settled in Aliquippa where his father worked at J & L Steel Company for 33 years. When Lassiter was in seventh grade, his parents, sisters Vera, Jessie, Ernestine, Rubie, Minnie, Gaynell and Dorothy, and

brother Cicero moved to Freedom and settled on Fourth Avenue between Eighth and Ninth Streets. James Sr. passed away in 2005; his 97-year old mother is still alive.

The Eight Street Playground is where Lassiter honed his basketball skills in pickup games with other basketball lovers. Lassiter recalls that Mr. Eugene Cercone, who later coached him in high school, was an influence in those early years. Coach Cercone would spend time at the playground supervising the area, repairing nets, and offering advice to young players. Eighth Street Playground became a mecca for young athletes who loved the sport of basketball. In the words of Cercone, "During his years at Freedom High School, Jim Lassiter was the consummate basketball player and team leader. Although he possessed outstanding skills, he remained humble and very dedicated. It was my pleasure to be his coach. His many accomplishments on the hardwood make him truly one of the most excellent athletes in Bulldog hoops history."

During his high school career, Lassiter participated in track and field, football, and basketball. He was a high jumper on the track team in addition to running the 220, 440 and the 880 relay. As a wide receiver on the Bulldogs football team, he was at a disadvantage because the team was essentially a running team so his talents could not be showcased. The team still managed to post a respectable 4-4-1 record under Head Coach Tom Saunders. According to Freedom sports historians, Lassiter could have lettered in baseball if Freedom had fielded a team.

But it was on the hardwood that Lassiter excelled. A 6'2" forward, he could do it all. He was an all around player on offense and defense who also demonstrated leadership skills in his role as team captain. According to Coach Cercone, Lassiter was the leading scorer and led the team in assists and in rebounding. In 1966 he was selected the Most Valuable Player of WPIAL Section 14; he was the unanimous pick of coaches for this honor. In addition to being named to the section team, he also represented Freedom on the All-State Team and was selected to play in the Pittsburgh Round Ball Classic.

According to many Freedom sports enthusiasts, if Lassiter had been playing today and had the advantage of scouting and media attention, he would have been a sure Division 1 candidate. His basketball skills did take him to the "Show Me State," Missouri's State Fair Community College in Sedalia. And did he show them! In his one year as a Road Runner he averaged 18 points per game

and was named MVP of the Missouri Community College Athletic Conference. Missouri Southern State University in Joplin was his next stop where he played for one year. As a Lion he averaged 13.9 points per game.

But Lassiter's sports career was not over yet. When he returned to the area, he played semi-professional softball for the Pittsburgh Hard Hats for two years. The travel time involved took him away from his family and his work commitment; he turned to amateur softball and played for local teams well into his fifties. His love of sports led him to give back to the community through coaching young people. He was the eighth and ninth grade boys basketball coach in the Big Beaver Falls School District for two years; he was the assistant boys basketball coach for the Rochester Area School District for four year; and he helped coach the Rochester Little Rams football team for five years.

Lassiter He has been a loyal employee of Rome Monument, now known as ATI, for over 29 years. He and his wife of 34 years Patricia live in Rochester and are the parents of two daughters and are the proud grandparents of four grandchildren.

In addition to being well liked and well regarded, James Lassiter Jr. may be one of the purest athletes ever to come out of Freedom Area High School.