

SANTA CLARA HONORS KENNY SEARS



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Kenny Sears, above center, a 1951 Watsonville High graduate and former All-American basketball player at Santa Clara, poses with family and friends while Sears' jersey is raised to the rafters, below, Saturday afternoon during halftime of a game at Santa Clara's Leavey Center.

Forever remembered

Watsonville great's jersey raised to rafters 52 years after his last game at Santa Clara

By ISAIAH GUZMAN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CLARA — When the New York Knicks or Golden State Warriors invite Kenny Sears to reunions, he turns them down. His black and gold jersey framed and mounted in the Watsonville High gym? He's never seen it.

Sears has never liked public appearances. But he couldn't get out of Saturday's engagement.

Fifty-two years after Sears helped lead Santa Clara University to the NCAA tournament for a third time, the school honored him by raising his No. 55 jersey to the Leavey Center rafters at halftime of the Broncos game against Loyola Marymount.

Surrounded by family at half court, Sears was

"He was the prototypical big guy who could play outside and inside. He was way ahead of his time."

CARROLL WILLIAMS ON KENNY SEARS

honored in front of a crowd of 2,278 — many of whom weren't born when he was named an All-American at the school as a senior in 1955, or when he played eight NBA seasons for the Knicks and San Francisco Warriors after that.

"They're retiring his jersey," said Sears' granddaughter, Samantha Jilka, one of 32 friends and

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family members in attendance. "He kind of had to go."

As the crowd rose to its feet and saluted with a loud ovation that lasted a couple minutes, Sears turned and gave a wave to those in front of him and those in back. He looked relaxed, but at one point shook his head and muttered, "This is embarrassing."

"I was glad I had people with me," said Sears afterward, "and glad I didn't have to speak."

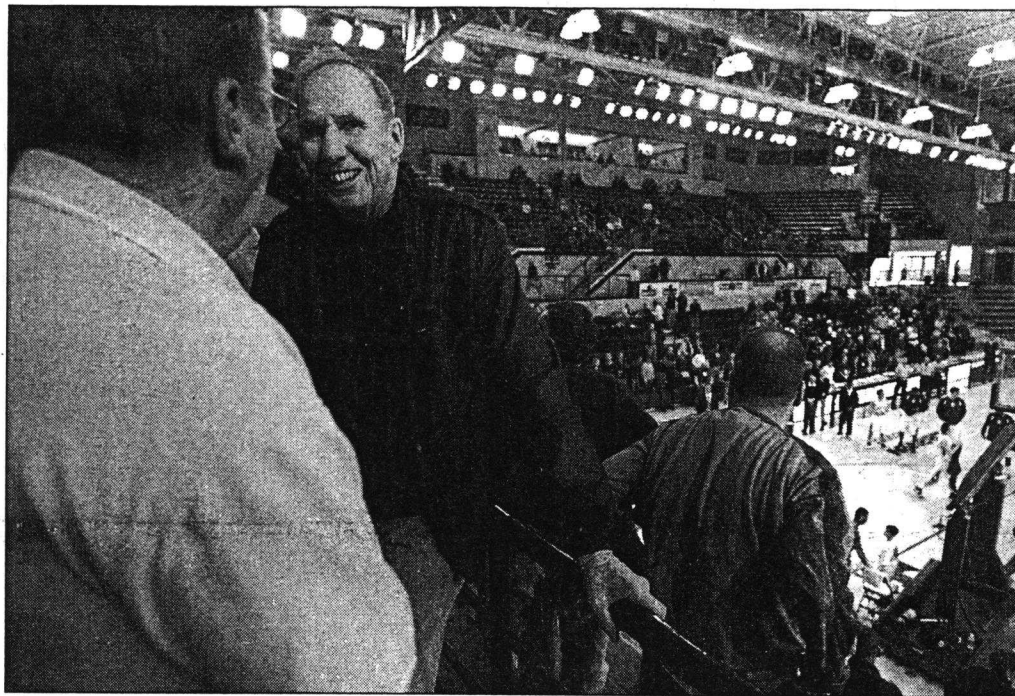
Seven former Broncos will have their jerseys hung from the rafters in celebration of Santa Clara's 100th season of men's basketball. The other honorees are Steve Nash, Bob Feerick, Nick Vanos, Bud Odgen, Dennis Awtrey and Kurt Rambis.

The day before his brief ceremony, the Watsonville native Sears, who underwent brain surgery in October, lamented nobody at Santa Clara would remember who he was, even though he was one of the greatest players who have attended the school.

As a senior, Sears beat out Bill Russell for the West Coast Conference Player of the Year award. Sears averaged 22.3 points per game that year, still the second highest single-season scoring average in Santa Clara history. Sears closed conference play in 1955 against Pacific with a 41-point, 30-rebound performance, a school single-game rebound record. He ranks seventh all time for the Broncos in scoring [1,586 points] and rebounds [733].

In 1954, a flat-topped Sears became the first basketball player to grace the cover of Sports Illustrated, a timeless image seen through a glass backboard of Sears hitting a hook shot.

Carroll Williams, a former Santa Clara athletic director who played against Sears at Lincoln High and San Jose State, was on hand Saturday.



Kenny Sears talks with former Cabrillo coach Bob Bulgalski before Saturday's game. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

"I didn't have to guard him, but he was such a presence," said Williams. "In my way of thinking, he was the prototypical big guy who could play outside and inside. He was way ahead of his time."

The No. 5 NBA draft pick in 1955, Sears signed for \$8,000 his rookie season. He would later lead the league in field goal percentage in 1959 and 1960 and was named to three All-Star teams.

A former RV dealer, Sears now lives off of his NBA pension, making more money than he ever did playing. He's spent the past 33 winters with his wife, Eunice, fishing and relaxing at their condo in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, although, with osteoporosis, he said those trips may come to

an end.

He still wears his NBA watch, but Sears isn't really one to put himself or mementos of his basketball accomplishments in plain sight.

"Once it was over with, that was the end of it," he said. "I just went about my normal life. Some guys live in the past, I guess."

Though he said he was honored to have his jersey canonized, Sears had different emotions about the standing ovation.

"What do I think about it?" he said. "It was embarrassing, that's what I think."

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