

## Columbia State Sports Head in Hall of Fame



When the Tennessee Community College Hall of Fame board met last year to determine their 2012 inductees, Columbia State athletic director Louis Conner was an overwhelming choice to be honored.

"Louis is a positive person, very helpful," said Tennessee Community College Athletic Association commissioner Jim Cigliano, who came from Cleveland to induct Conner between basketball games at the Billy Webster Athletic Center.

"Louis has been very helpful to me since I became commissioner four years ago. And he's been a credit to the school and our conference since he came to Columbia State," Cigliano said.

Conner, a graduate of Columbia State where he also played basketball, returned to the school as the head men's basketball coach in 1988. He became the school's athletic director in 2005.

"Louis cares about the students beyond what they do in athletics," said Dr. Janet Smith, the president of Columbia State. "He wants the young men and women to succeed in life."

No one has followed Conner from his childhood days until now better than Roy Dukes, a longtime educator and former coach and school superintendent in Marshall County.

"Louis is so unselfish. He has been a role model for so many young people," said Dukes. "I am certainly proud of him and what he has accomplished."

Conner and his wife, Pat, have also been a vital part of the school and community.

"Louis and his family are a credit to Columbia State, and to the community," said Dr. Kermit Smith, who retired from his duties as region director and publicist with the TCCAA.

Dr. Smith and retired Columbia State president Dr. Paul Sands played the lead roles in the forming of the conference 44 years ago.

Conner was one of the TCCAA's first student/athletes, coming to Columbia State as a basketball player from Jones High School in Lewisburg in 1967. At that time, Dr. Sands was the school's athletic director.

"Louis was like a coach on the court. He was a genuine person then, and he still is now," said Dr. Sands, who along with Kermit Smith were the first inductees into the TCCAA Hall of Fame.

James Claybourne, who was a teammate of Conner's at Columbia State, echoes a similar thought.

"Louis was always level headed," said Claybourne, a longtime assistant coach at Shelbyville High. "If we ever started playing wild on the basketball court, he would get us straight."

Several of Conner's former players were present including Eric Johnson, who played for Conner both at Marshall County High and Columbia State.

"Coach Conner always cared for us as a person, not just as basketball player," said Johnson, who now leads a non-profit organization in Nashville. "He always has an interest in his former students."

Conner, who also played for Florence State (now University of North Alabama), voiced his appreciation to those who created his opportunities at Columbia State.

"Dr. Sands didn't just offer me the coaching job, he told me I was going to be coach," said Conner. Conner thanked Dr. Janet Smith for her support, and the student services department for all they do to help him.

For the large majority of the years the TCCAA has conducted its baseball/softball region tournament, Columbia State has been the choice for the site.

Conner has directed the tournament five years, and Conner noted that Dave Hall, the former athletic director, was a big help as was the school's Athletic Booster Club for the foundation they developed.

"So many people have helped, but it's my wife and our boys who sacrificed for me," said Conner. "A lot of recruiting trip, road games and practices. Pat raised our boys for us."

Conner became Columbia State's fifth representative in the Hall of Fame, which is included in the junior college section of the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame at Bridgestone Arena in Nashville.

The other four are Dr. Sands, (baseball coach, athletic director) Dave Hall, (baseball coach) Jim Painter and (former women's basketball coach) Larry Brewer.

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