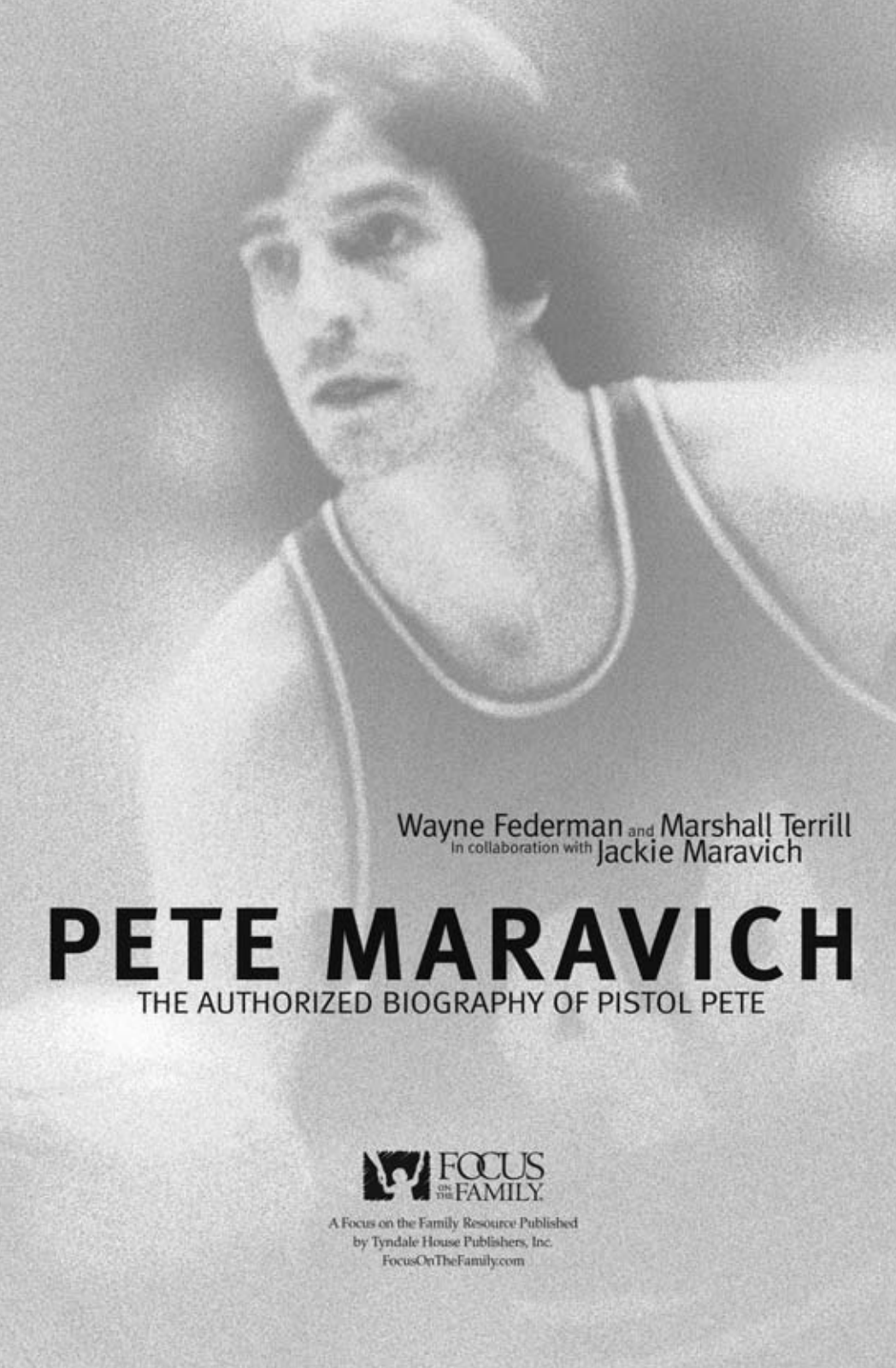


# PETE MARAVICH

THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF PISTOL PETE



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.  
Carol Stream, Illinois



Wayne Federman and Marshall Terrill  
In collaboration with Jackie Maravich

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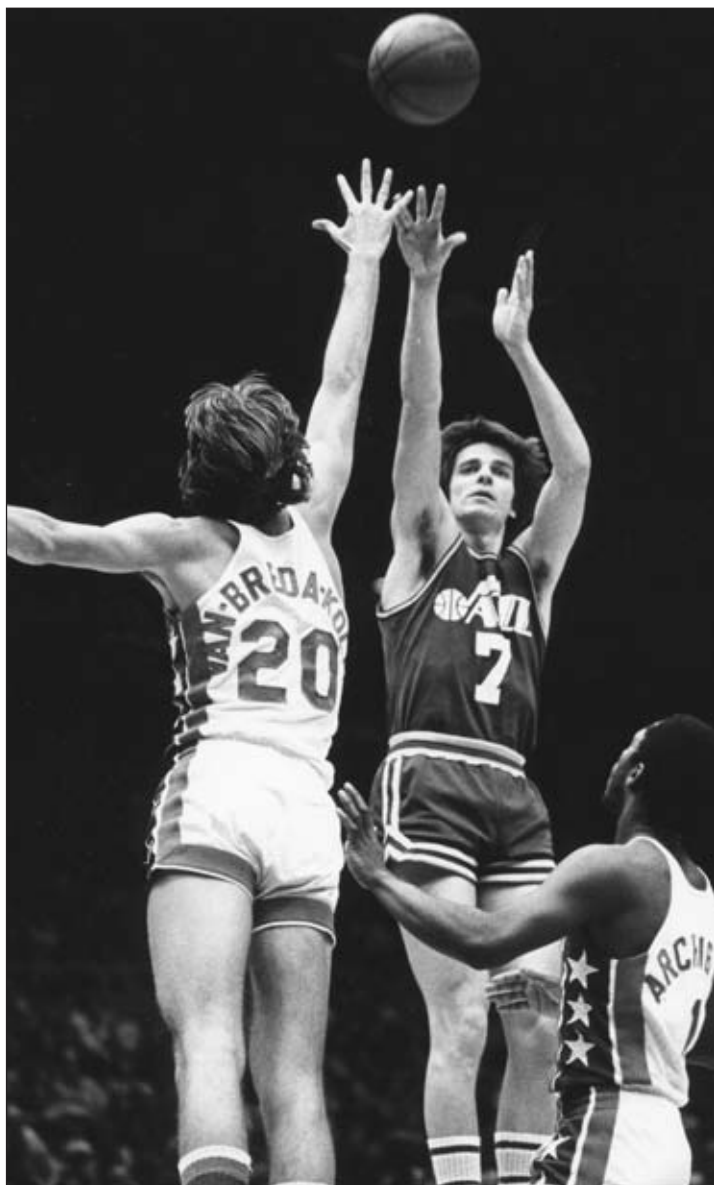
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For  
Peter, Jackie, Jaeson, and Joshua



Pistol Pete

# Contents

Foreword . . . . .	ix
Prologue . . . . .	xiii

## PART 1: EARLY DAYS

1. Birth of a Legend . . . . .	3
2. Happy Days . . . . .	17
3. Tobacco Road . . . . .	37
4. The Lost Year . . . . .	52

## PART 2: LOUISIANA STATE

5. Baby Bengal . . . . .	63
6. Showtime . . . . .	84
7. Olympic Trials (and Tribulations) . . . . .	106
8. Pandemonium in Sneakers . . . . .	118
9. The Road Show . . . . .	135
10. Nine Days in Gotham . . . . .	159

## PART 3: NBA

11. Millionaire . . . . .	171
12. Rookie Trials . . . . .	187
13. Avant Guard . . . . .	201
14. Omni All-Star . . . . .	214
15. The Unraveling . . . . .	229
16. The Louisiana Purchase . . . . .	224
17. Under the Dome . . . . .	244
18. Scoring Champion . . . . .	270
19. Wounded Knee . . . . .	291
20. Lenox Hill . . . . .	304
21. The Mormon Trail . . . . .	316
22. Celtic Farewell . . . . .	327

## PART 4: REBORN

23. Withdrawal . . . . .	341
24. Reborn . . . . .	348
25. Purpose Driven Life . . . . .	357

26. Springfield ..... 374  
27. Broken Heart ..... 384  
28. Heirs to a Dream ..... 395

PART 5: APPENDIX

Acknowledgments ..... 415  
Career Statistics: NCAA and NBA ..... 419  
Game-by-Game Scoring at LSU ..... 423  
The Pistol's 25 Greatest Games ..... 426  
Selected References ..... 431  
Index ..... 438

# Foreword

Pete Maravich may have had as big an impact on the game of basketball as any player in modern history. If a chronicle of his unprecedented athletic achievements is what you're looking for, you'll certainly find it within the pages of this book: more than 40 NCAA records (many of which still stand today); an average of 44 points per game at LSU and 24 points per game over his 10 years in the NBA; five *Sports Illustrated* covers; and an illustrious collection of awards, records, milestones, and landmarks too numerous to list.

Even today, two decades after his death, the name "Pistol Pete" inspires awe, respect, and admiration from those both inside and outside the world of sports. He was an icon in the days before salary caps, ESPN, and one-and-done college careers. He was the real deal.

Nevertheless, the awards, records, and recognition were not what ultimately defined Pete Maravich. By his own admission, he reached a point in his life where he realized that fame and fortune were ultimately meaningless in the eternal scheme of things. As he would later say, "Money will buy you anything but happiness. It'll pay your fare to every place but heaven." And so, on a rainy night in 1982, he asked Jesus Christ to fill his life and his heart. For the remainder of his days on earth, which ended in 1988, "Pistol Pete's" passion was not basketball or any other earthly pursuit, but his love for God and his desire to share it with others.

And that is where he and I crossed paths for the first time. I did not know Pete well, but we did begin to develop a friendship when, in 1987, I invited him to share his story on our *Focus on the Family* radio program. On January 5, 1988, the day the broadcast was to be recorded, I had the audacity to invite Pistol Pete to join me and several of my colleagues for an early morning pick-up basketball game at a local church gym. Early morning games of this sort had been a tri-weekly tradition among us for years.

The sports legend was very gracious to accept our invitation and to endeavor not to embarrass the rest of us too severely while we lumbered around the court as only over-the-hill guys can.

I quickly learned that Pete had been suffering from unidentified pain in his right shoulder for many months. If it had been in his left, physicians would have suspected it was his heart. The problem was incorrectly diagnosed as "neuralgia." Aside from playing in the NBA Legends game, he had not been

on the basketball court in more than a year. Nevertheless, we had a good time that morning.

Pete moved at about one-third his normal speed, and the rest of us huffed and puffed to keep up. We played for about 45 minutes and then took a break to get a drink. Pete and I stayed on the court and talked while waiting for the other players to come back. He spoke of his desire to play more recreational basketball after his struggles with shoulder pain were over.

“How do you feel today?” I asked.

“I feel great,” he said.

Those were Pete’s last words. I turned to walk away and, for some reason, looked back in time to see him go down. His face and body hit the boards hard. Still, I thought he was teasing. Pete had a great sense of humor, and I assumed that he was playing off his final comment about feeling good.

I hurried over to where he lay, still expecting to see him get up laughing. But then I saw that he was having a seizure. I held his tongue to keep his air passage open and called for the other guys to come help me. The seizure lasted about 20 seconds, and then Pete stopped breathing. We started CPR immediately but were never able to get another heartbeat or breath.

Pete died in my arms.

Several of us accompanied the ambulance to the hospital, where we prayerfully watched the emergency room staff try to revive him for another 45 minutes. But it was no use.

An autopsy revealed a few days later that Pete suffered from a congenital heart malformation and never knew it. That was why his shoulder had been hurting. How he was able to perform such incredible exploits on the basketball court for so many years is a medical mystery. He was destined to drop dead at a fairly young age, and only God knows why it happened during the brief moment when his path crossed mine.

In the world of sports, it’s not about how you start; it’s about how you finish. If you’re a coach, no one will remember your early victories if your team loses the big game at the end of the season. At the same time, legends are made by those who overcome losses and disappointments early to emerge victorious when the championship trophy is up for grabs. Those are the “dream teams” that people remember.

Pistol Pete’s life was like that. Without a doubt, his massive, record-smashing contributions to the game of basketball are worthy of the accolades he has received. But his accomplishments and his trophies did not give him satisfaction. Pete found lasting peace and contentment in the saving grace of God, and I believe he would want to be remembered first and foremost as a

passionate follower of Jesus Christ. It's not about how you start; it's about how you finish.

During our basketball game on the morning Pete died, he was wearing a T-shirt that read, "Looking unto Jesus," which is a reference to Hebrews 12:2. That says it all, doesn't it? You'll read a lot about basketball and trophies and fame in this book, and there's no denying the remarkable achievements of one of America's truly great basketball players. However, in the end, I believe the simple message contained on that T-shirt tells you all you need to know about Pete Maravich.

JAMES C. DOBSON, PH.D.

Founder and Chairman of Focus on the Family

# Prologue

*“He was unstoppable. It’s as if they had melted down all 12 Harlem Globetrotters and then filled up this skinny 6-6 white frame with everything they had.”*

—RALPH WILEY, SPORTSWRITER

*“Pete had a strange, strange upbringing. Hoops were put so much beyond where they deserved to be. See, basketball is a thing to be used. Or it’ll use you.”*

—AL MCGUIRE, HALL OF FAME BASKETBALL COACH

On August 18, 1970, Pete Maravich was in the Catskill Mountains, a region in upstate New York whose many resorts had long been regarded as a tough proving ground for up-and-coming entertainers. He was scheduled to present a basketball show at Kutshers Country Club.

By the late summer of 1970, “Pistol Pete” was already a legend. With his signature gray socks flopping around his ankles and his shaggy hair flying in the breeze, he had dazzled the sports world with jaw-dropping displays of basketball wizardry while a student at Louisiana State University. Over 83 varsity games he scored 3,667 points—an average of 44.2 points each game.

Although he had yet to play in an NBA game, several months earlier he had signed a historic contract with the Atlanta Hawks and inked endorsement deals with manufacturers of basketballs, sneakers, and hair products.

He was at Kutshers to participate in the Stokes Memorial All-Star Game, an annual fund-raiser to benefit Maurice Stokes, the 1956 NBA Rookie of the Year with the Cincinnati Royals who had been badly injured during a game in 1958. The Stokes matchup typically featured a mix of NBA veterans and promising newcomers like Maravich and fellow rookie Dave Cowens.

Maravich had agreed to perform his crowd-pleasing basketball clinic before the game tipped off. Joining him for this exhibition was Marques Haynes, the dribbling sensation who had spent seven seasons with the barnstorming Harlem Globetrotters. The future and the past met on the court that hot August afternoon.

Several hundred onlookers were mesmerized as Pete ran through his

amazing repertoire of shooting, dribbling, and passing drills. As the demonstration neared its conclusion, journalist Jim O'Brien noticed that a young boy had walked over to Pete's father, Press, to ask a question.

"How long," the youngster asked, "did it take Pete to learn to do that?"

"All his life," Press answered.

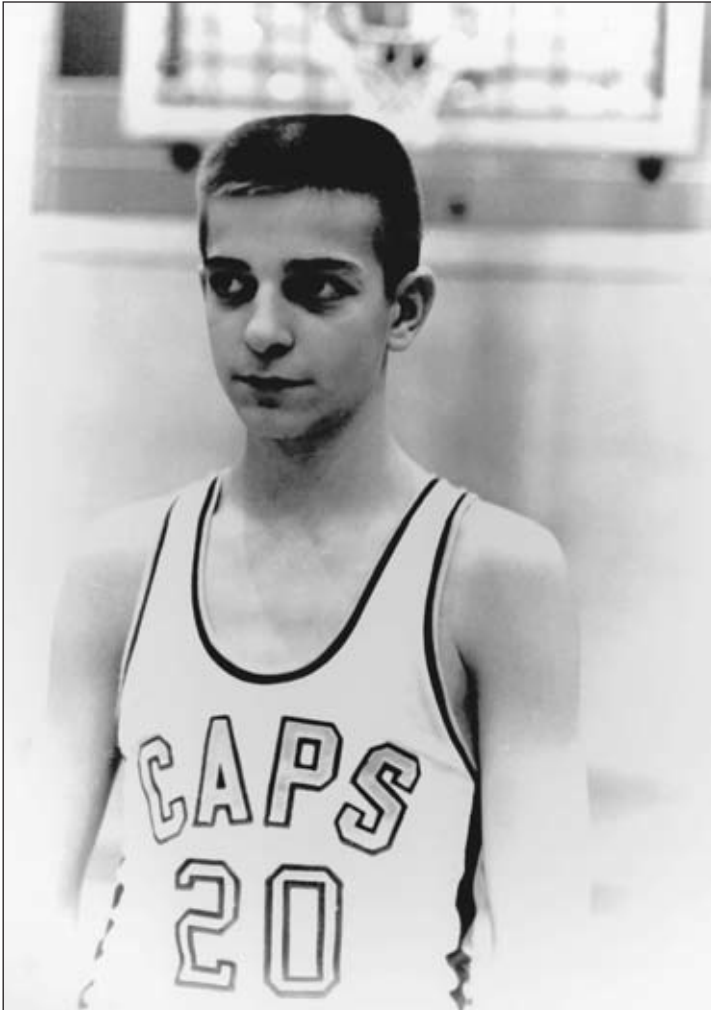
"Oh," said the boy as he walked away. "I don't have that much time."

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# Part 1

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## Early Days



Courtesy Jackie Maravich

Pete Maravich in high school

# 1

## Birth of a Legend

*“To tell my life story is to tell my father’s story, the two are so interwoven.”*

—PETE MARAVICH

*“Farewell, then, Age of Iron; all hail, King Steel.”*

—ANDREW CARNEGIE

On August 22, 1875, outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Scottish immigrant Andrew Carnegie began producing steel utilizing a new invention called the Bessemer Converter. The converter revolutionized the industry by blasting air through the super-heated liquid metal and removing impurities, thus spawning the era of low-cost steel production. The ubiquitous metal provided the super-structure for the greatest industrialized economy on earth and the demand for it grew exponentially. To satisfy America’s voracious appetite for steel, manufacturers like Carnegie needed a large pool of strong, hard-working laborers.

It was the promise of steady employment that lured Pete Maravich’s paternal grandparents, Vajo and Sarah (Radulovich), to western Pennsylvania. They left Dreznica, Lika (later Yugoslavia) and became part of a huge Serbian migration to the United States at the close of the nineteenth century.

The Serbs quickly gained a reputation as tough, hard laborers who would accept backbreaking jobs in the copper, gold, coal, and steel industries. It was dangerous work with minimal government safeguards or union protection. Vajo Maravich found steady employment as a locomotive engineer for a mill and started a family. Although Vajo and Sarah could barely speak English, they rented a small house on Sarah Street on the south side of Pittsburgh and had 10 children. They were living the immigrants’ dream in a new world full of opportunities, but their life was about to take a tragic turn.

One evening in 1917, while working the midnight shift, Vajo was killed

in a train accident in Clairton, Pennsylvania. More misery struck Sarah and her children in the fall of 1918 when the worldwide flu epidemic spread to the United States. It was the most lethal epidemic in human history, killing an estimated 30 million worldwide and 195,000 Americans in October alone—the deadliest month in U.S. history. By the time the killer flu ran its course more than 550,000 Americans had died, including nine of Sarah’s children. The only surviving child was a robust boy named Peter who, by most accounts, had turned three on August 29, 1918.

Somehow Sarah found the strength to overcome her staggering tragedy. She married another steel worker named George Kosanovich, and bore him two children, Sam and Mark. In the early 1920s, the family of five moved 20 miles northwest to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, one of 13 “River Bottom Communities.”

Andrew Carnegie’s old plants (by then renamed U.S. Steel) weren’t the only gainful employers in Western Pennsylvania. A slew of manufacturers set up shop along the rural river towns. Basketball historian Ralph Ferrante, who grew up not far away in Ellwood City, remembered the steel mill towns of Pennsylvania as tough, brutal communities whose landscapes reflected the blue-collar lifestyle.

“It was an old, awful, dirty town with smoke stacks dominating the skyline and polluting the air,” Ferrante said. “There were mills in every town along the Ohio River: Aliquippa, Ambridge, Beaver Falls, Monaca, New Brighton, Rochester, and Ellwood City. We called them ‘dirty little towns.’ It wasn’t meant to be derogatory, but they were dirty because of the mills, which were going 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

Peter Maravich was raised in this dank, loud, toxic community. The family settled at 418 Hopewell Avenue in the northern part of Aliquippa known as Logstown Section—Plan 2. His stepfather worked for the huge Jones and Laughlin (J&L) steel company. Dr. Steve Zernich, who knew the family and played basketball with Peter, recalled the Aliquippa community was segregated by ethnicity, race, and employment status.

“Aliquippa was mostly ethnics,” Zernich explained. “J&L built homes in various plans from 1 to 12. Serbian, Croatian, and some Slavs lived in Logstown—Plan 2. West Aliquippa was Italian. Plan 11 was blacks. Plan 6 was where the bosses lived. It was the type of town where everyone had their own section.”

Peter was a quick-witted, energetic, and industrious youngster. “He always had to be doing something,” recalled his stepbrother Sam Kosanovich. One of his first jobs was hawking street copies of the *Pittsburgh Press*, a job

that led to his nickname. “As a kid he used to walk down the street and scream, ‘*Pittsburgh Press! Pittsburgh Press!*’ So we called him ‘Press,’” recalled Kosanovich. The nickname suited him fine—for Press thought Peter was a “sissy” name.

It was music, not sports, that was emphasized in the Kosanovich home. Press’s stepfather and cousins spent many evenings eating, drinking wine, and singing old Serbian folk songs. Press was coerced into taking banjo, violin, and even harp lessons, but it was basketball, a sport still in its infancy, that captured his imagination.

Press and his friends played on the street for hours. They didn’t have a ball, so they improvised, placing a rock in a tin can, wrapping the can in newspapers, and then winding it all with electrical tape. They shot the “ball” into a bottomless apple basket nailed to a light pole.

The boys played into the night—coping with inclement weather and a local cop named Officer Istock, who tried to enforce a 9 P.M. curfew. It took a religious intervention to eventually improve the boys’ hoop environment. Reverend Ernest Anderson of the Woodlawn Mission, a local Protestant church, offered Press and his friends a deal: He’d welcome them into the church’s new state-of-the-art gym (wood floor, wooden backboards, nets, and leather basketballs) if they’d attend Bible study three times a week. The basketball-hungry kids readily agreed.

“Only after we learned our Bible lessons did we head for the basketball court,” Press recalled in a 1971 piece he wrote for *Coaches Digest*. “There in the church I learned a thrilling, invigorating game. We managed to get in five days of play weekly—after we’d convinced the Reverend Mr. Anderson that we’d been attentive scholars.”

The young hoopsters, led by Press, played whenever they could and named themselves the “Daniel Boys”—after the biblical figure.

The reverend’s arrangement mirrored the origins of the game. Basketball’s originator, James Naismith, was a divinity doctorate that loved athletics. In his youth he excelled in boxing, gymnastics, soccer, and rugby. While working at a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) training school in Springfield, Massachusetts, he invented “Basket Ball.” Dr. Naismith believed that clean, hard, and square athletic competition was a conduit to spiritual righteousness. He referred to the union as “muscular Christianity,” and he believed his new game would help spread the message.

It wouldn’t be the last time that Christianity, basketball, and the Maraviches intersected.

“Basketball, more so than football, was a real Americanization sport for

Press Maravich,” said Phil Hart, editor of *Serb World U.S.A.* Press would spend the next seven decades contemplating the complexities and possibilities of the game. In Pittsburgh, he would sometimes attend games played by the professional barnstorming teams of the day. He was mesmerized by the sport’s beauty, synchronization, and physicality. His idols were Nat Holman, Henry “Dutch” Dehnert, and Joe Lapchick. All played for the Original Celtics, a team that was then based in New York City.

Press blossomed at the high-school level under the guidance of long-time Aliquippa High coach and former pro player, Nate Lippe. Maravich mastered the fundamentals and developed a quick-release set shot. He’d dribble down the court, stop on a dime, and fire up two-handed, flat-footed set shots that frequently found their mark. At a solid six-feet, 185 pounds, Press became a high school sports hero. A fleet-footed forward, he once scored 28 points on his own at a time when most teams struggled to score that many in an entire game. Press was voted team captain his junior and senior years (1935 and 1936) and was selected All-Section for three straight seasons.

Away from school, Press worked as a pipe threader on the graveyard shift at the mill. For three years the teenager juggled school, work, and basketball by depriving himself of sleep. He received a Vocational Prep degree upon graduation in spring of 1936. Soon basketball provided him an opportunity to return to the same company where his father had been employed. He went to work at J&L’s Blooming Mill and competed in the company’s basketball league. His team won the 1936 league championship. Thanks to his prowess on the court, J&L rewarded him with a higher paying job as an inspector.

But Press had his heart set on attending college, a rare aspiration in an era when only 19 percent of Americans even completed high school. He believed basketball could provide a scholarship and a passport out of the hard, dreary life of a steel town.

“Press was a visionary,” said Dr. Michael Zernich, who also lived in Aliquippa. “There were those of us who had the option of getting out and there were those who were stuck. One of the fellows who played on my high school team fell off of a platform and into a vat of molten steel. There was no one looking over the steel mill saying this is unsafe. Basketball became Press’s ticket out.”

Press was offered partial basketball scholarships from Duke, Duquesne, and Long Island universities. Unfortunately the Kosanovich family could not afford to pay the difference. Then Press caught a lucky break. One of his high school rivals, Mike Winne of Ambridge, suggested he visit Davis & Elkins

College in Elkins, West Virginia, about 150 miles south of Pittsburgh. Bud Shelton, the school's new basketball coach, took an instant liking to Press and offered him a full scholarship, a rarity in 1937. Before heading off to college, Press again led his Blooming Mill team, composed of Doc Dzurko, Richard Thomas, Nick Wukas, Bill Philipovich, and Pete Suder, to the championship of the J&L League.

Press thrived at college. The handsome, fast-talking, tobacco-chewing Serb immediately ingratiated himself with the faculty and student body. He loved the academic atmosphere and quickly taught himself shorthand and typing—skills that came in handy as a student and then later, as a basketball coach. As a scholarship athlete Press was also required to play football—which he did reluctantly. But it was in basketball, as the team's starting left guard, where he made a name for himself. He arrived just as the NCAA updated its rules, eliminating a jump ball after every basket. The game was speeding up and Press blossomed as a result.

A January 3, 1941, *New York Times* article described a showdown at the Brooklyn School of Pharmacy gymnasium, where the undefeated (9-0) Long Island University, coached by the legendary Clair Bee, beat Davis & Elkins 54-42:

*Only the sensational shooting of Peter Maravich kept Davis & Elkins in the game. He was high scorer with 27 points, tallying his team's first ten baskets and the only foul shot in the second period.*

Press's scholarship did not cover all his expenses. He still had to pay for books, clothes, and food on the weekends. The small town of Elkins, nestled at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains, offered plenty in terms of natural beauty but, with the depression in its eighth year, provided little in terms of jobs. Press earned extra cash by helping families start their coal furnaces in the morning. He charged 25 cents. On weekends he put his scholarship in jeopardy and covertly played semi-pro basketball for the Clarksburg Pure Oilers, using the alias "Peter Munell." For \$10 a game, Press competed against the barnstorming teams of the day like the Harlem Globetrotters, Original Celtics, Detroit Eagles, and Rochester Royals.

Press amassed 1,326 points in four seasons at D&E, a school scoring record that stood for nine years. He was twice voted "best looking man on campus," as well as student-body president and captain of the basketball team. He was also twice named to the All-West Virginia Conference team, and

inducted into the Davis & Elkins Hall of Fame in 1978.

Press graduated in the spring of 1941 with a bachelor of arts in Business Administration and a bachelor of science in Physical Education. He returned to Aliquippa to find work, but despite holding two college degrees, he could only find work as a pipe threader. So he enlisted in the Navy and, while waiting to be called up, continued to play for the Clarksburg Pure Oilers. There Press developed a close friendship with his teammate Jules Rivlin, a creative, flamboyant player who shared his passion for the game.

Rivlin had also played college ball in West Virginia, at Marshall University under visionary coach Cam Henderson, who helped pioneer the fast-break offense. Henderson believed every offensive possession was an opportunity for a team to push the ball up court with its players filling specific, numbered “lanes.” In the center lane was the team’s best ball handler and passer, a player who could survey the floor and exploit the easiest scoring opportunity. On the Marshall University team that man was Jules Rivlin.

“I went right down the middle,” Rivlin explained in 2000. “I went down to the foul line and stopped and I learned to stop on a dime. Sometimes I would look one way, pass the other. I first threw the ball behind my back in 1937. My college coach, may he rest in peace, wouldn’t let anybody do that except me.”

Rivlin and Maravich became fast friends, playing ball and experimenting with offensive schemes, creative ball handling, and deceptive passing. The Oilers home games, promoted by local sportswriter Wade Pepper, were played in Clarksburg and Fairmont, West Virginia.

In the third week of the season, in a game against the Detroit Eagles, Press scorched the defending world champions for 30 points. The Eagles’ head coach was Henry “Dutch” Dehnert, Press’s boyhood idol from the Original Celtics. Dehnert liked what he saw in Maravich and offered him a position with the Eagles. Press agreed and played 75 games in 1941–42 for Detroit before his call-up telegram arrived from the War Department.

After donning a Navy uniform his training took him to various locations around the country: Anacostia Naval Air Station in Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Louisiana (where he mastered Morse Code), and finally Pensacola, Florida. Lieutenant Maravich was commissioned an Ensign and received his “wings” in September 1942.

After a short stay at the North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego, Press was shipped to the Pacific. While receiving some final training in Hawaii, Press was named player-coach of the Kaneohe Klippers basketball team and, under his guidance, they won the 1943 Service Basketball Cham-

pionship for the city of Honolulu.

Press served with the legendary “Black Cat” Squadron (VP-12) that received its nickname because their planes (Catalina PBY-5A) were painted black. In a sense the Black Cats were a low-tech stealth unit. They flew primarily at night using stars for navigation. Their missions included reconnaissance, air sea rescue, dive-bombing, mine laying, and torpedo attacks. The squadron was originally based at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, but moved closer to Japan as the Pacific campaign progressed.

Wes Hicks, a crew member in Press’s squadron, recalled a particularly dangerous rescue in July 1943.

“We landed in heavy seas to pick up a fighter pilot who had ditched his aircraft,” said Hicks. “Then, with the fighter pilot still aboard, we picked up Marine Colonel Linscott off the beach from our Bougainvillea invasion. Picking up Colonel Linscott was no easy trick. He had gone in with the initial wave and we were ordered to pick him back up from a small boat just offshore two days later. To accomplish this, we had to land under fire from Japanese shore batteries and we were fighting heavy seas. But we got the Colonel aboard safely and out of there.”

After completing his combat duty, Press became a flight instructor in Pensacola and dreamed of one day becoming a commercial airline pilot. He was weighing a job offer from the U.S. government (instructing pilots in China) when Paul Birch, coach of the Youngstown Bears of the professional National Basketball League, invited Press to join his team. Press said “no thank you” to Uncle Sam and “yes” to Coach Birch. Armed with a colorful new vocabulary, compliments of the Navy, Press joined the Bears almost a third of the way into its 1945–46 season and played 31 games, averaging 5.6 points a contest.

In the spring of 1946, just outside Aliquippa, Press noticed a beautiful young woman working as a taxi dispatcher. As he approached her, she asked, “What’s with all the stitches? You a boxer?”

Press explained that he was, in fact, a professional basketball player. The two had an immediate connection. Her name was Helen Montini. She was also Serbian, the daughter of a steel worker, and had attended Aliquippa High where she was a popular cheerleader. Press asked her out just minutes into their conversation, and several evenings later they went to Bill Green’s Night Club in Pleasant Hills, a suburb of Pittsburgh.

“It was really the biggest and best nightspot in all of Pittsburgh and the South Hills,” recalled Harold Wiegel, Jr., who grew up near the famed club

off Old Clairton Road and Route 51. “That was the place to go if you really wanted to impress someone.”

As Press performed a dip at the end of their first dance, he said, “We should be married.”

Helen replied, “You’re crazy. Married?”

“That’s right,” he said.

As the night grew Press learned that Helen, just 22, was already a widow. Her husband, Elvidio Montini, was killed during the Battle of the Bulge, one of almost 19,000 American deaths in the terrible clash on the German/Belgian border. Elvidio and Helen had one son, Ronnie. Neither Helen’s previous marriage nor her three-year-old boy dissuaded Press, and soon afterward, they decided to tie the knot.

In June 1946, Press and Helen recited their vows at the St. Elijah Serbian Orthodox Church in Aliquippa in front of almost 500 guests, an eclectic mix of family, Serbs, locals, Navy men, and college and pro basketball players. The newlyweds honeymooned in Chicago. It was there that Press revealed his dream of becoming a commercial airline pilot and earning a comfortable, stable living for the young couple.

Helen was staggered. Traumatized by her first husband’s death and her father’s abandonment, she shuddered at the thought of possibly losing another man. She pleaded with Press to select another, less risky, profession. Press was at a loss for words.

“Okay, what do you suggest I do to support us?” Press asked.

“Every story you’ve ever told me concerns coaching basketball,” Helen replied. “How about that? What about basketball?”

“For you, I’ll go into coaching,” Press replied.

In the fall of 1946, Press began his final season as a basketball player. Once again, his coach was Paul Birch, only this time their team was the Pittsburgh Ironmen of the brand new Basketball Association of America—a league that eventually became the National Basketball Association (NBA). On the road he roomed with the squad’s best player, Coulby Gunther. In those days pro basketball was a low-scoring game in which shooting accuracy was anemic by modern standards. Gunther, for instance, led the Ironmen with 14.1 points per game and was the league’s fourth most accurate shooter at only 33.6 percent. Maravich played in 51 games and averaged 4.5 points for the Ironmen. Earlier in the season he learned that Helen was pregnant. She was due in June.

On June 22, 1947, Press sped home after a Serbian League basketball

game, helped Helen into the family car, and raced to the delivery room at Sewickley Valley Hospital. With a chew of Mail Pouch tobacco in the corner of his mouth, Press made the 10-mile trek in record time.

“Doc, I want a son,” Press told obstetrician H. B. Jones upon arrival. “If it’s a boy, I’ll pay you. If it’s a girl, you pay me.”

Jones agreed to the terms. Moments later, the doctor emerged from the delivery room and said to the new father, “You pay.”

Peering through the pane glass of the maternity ward, Press saw his son for the first time and marveled, “Look at those hands! Look at those feet! The kid’s got it I tell you,” Press said to anyone within earshot.

The proud parents named their son Peter Press Maravich.

Years later, Press told a reporter, “As an infant, he already had instinctive ability. You could see it in the way he reacted to things around him. The toys in his crib, the things he played around the house. To tell you the truth, I think he was born with a basketball in his genes.”

Gunther, Press’s Ironmen teammate, recalled a visit to the Maravich home. “His dad already had a small basketball in the baby’s hands,” Gunther recalled. “And informed me that Pete would not only be a great one, but have a great hook shot—which was my specialty.”

That fall, Press, with family in tow, embarked on his coaching career. Helen, like many post-WWII brides, was content being a homemaker, taking care of her two sons. The Maravich family hopped from school to school as Press worked his way up the coaching ladder. His first stop was West Virginia, where in 1947–48 he was an assistant coach and director of intramural sports at his alma mater, Davis & Elkins. From there he took an assistant coaching position in basketball (and football) under Lee Patton at the University of West Virginia, where he also earned a master’s degree in Recreation and Health Education.

Press was carving out his own American success story. Although his parents had minimal education and barely spoke English, their son had earned a graduate degree. His thesis, *Basketball Scouting* (co-authored by James Steel), was the first book published on the “science” of evaluating talent. Press had come a long way from the soot-filled immigrant towns of western Pennsylvania.

In 1949 Press earned his first head-coaching assignment at West Virginia Wesleyan. A year later he returned to Davis & Elkins for a two-year head coaching stint. He arrived to discover his old team was still playing in a local high school gym.

“I went to the president, and he told me they only had \$35 in the ath-

letic kitty,” Maravich later said. “I got some of the boys together, and we went out and got a tractor and sawed down some trees.”

Next, Maravich contacted a local reporter and a photographer.

“Ground Cleared for Gymnasium” read the following day’s paper.

The industrious coach made good on his promise to build a new gym. He rounded up retired carpenters to help build what would become Press’s most enduring legacy in West Virginia. The 1,500-seat gym was erected without construction permits from the city of Elkins or approval from Davis & Elkins’ governing board. It was completed within a year and still stands to this day.

In general, Press’s days at Davis & Elkins were frustrating. He never received his promised bonus money and was stretched thin by multiple duties as athletic director, assistant football coach, and typing and shorthand teacher. Yet he tallied a respectable 37–21 record before returning to suburban Pittsburgh in 1952 after receiving a more lucrative offer from Baldwin High School. Two years later, his life came full circle when he accepted the coaching job at his old school, Aliquippa High.

The Maraviches rented a house in a section of Aliquippa known as Sheffield Terrace. There, Press began another project—a calculated plan to steep his youngest boy in the game of basketball. When Pete was two, Press gave him a basketball for Christmas. Surprisingly, the boy didn’t care much for it, preferring to play with an old trumpet.

“Pete was as enthusiastic about basketball as going to the dentist,” Press once quipped to a reporter. Eventually Press tried a more subtle approach. He would enthusiastically shoot baskets each night after dinner as young Pete watched intently. Finally he coaxed his son to join him.

“Pete, where’s your basketball?” Press asked. “Come over here and take a shot.”

Pete missed the first set shot, not even hitting the net. Press looked for an expression on his son’s face and detected a hint of anger. Pete chased down the bouncing ball and attempted another shot. Again he missed. Another shot—another miss. But he never gave up trying.

“When he got mad and kept shooting,” smiled Press, “I had him hooked.” It was the first step in molding a prodigy.

Pete Maravich’s basketball apprenticeship coincided with the start of his formal education at New Sheffield Elementary School, a five-minute walk from his home. Ron Juth, a sophomore on Press’s varsity team when Pete was just a first grader, noticed the young boy’s attachment to the game. “Pete always had a basketball in his hands,” Juth said. “While he was only seven years

old, I could see that he was already special.”

In the winter of 1955, Press helped launch a local Bidly Basketball League. The Bidly program, intended for boys from first to fifth grade, used a smaller ball, a shortened free-throw line, and eight-foot baskets. Regular-season games were held in the New Sheffield school gymnasium.

The league met on Saturdays during winter and drew kids from the five elementary schools in the Aliquippa area. Several special players got their start in the program: George Zatezalo, Rich Lupcho, and Paul Milanovich went on to all play NCAA Division I college basketball. Press Maravich helped out by running drills with the kids before the games.

Almost 50 years later, Michael Keller, a fellow Bidly leaguer, still recalled the detailed instructions Press barked out in the winter of 1955. “Rear pivot. Front pivot. Bend those knees. Pivot on the ball of your foot. Chest pass. Thumbs must be centered over the ball. Step forward with your right leg. Keep your elbows in, rotate your arms out, and snap your wrist as you release with an extended follow through. Again.”

Press not only espoused forward-thinking concepts, but also introduced gadgets to improve skills, recalled Paul Milanovich. “He had special glasses for kids that he would put on you so you couldn’t look down. He had the bottoms darkened out so that you couldn’t see the basketball when you were dribbling. And he would stand in front of you blowing the whistle and point left and right and back and forward, and he just grilled you for, it seemed like, forever. Press always felt you had to have the foundation before you put the roof on.”

Michael Keller remembered eight-year-old Pete as not only fundamentally sound but also quite advanced.

“Pete was one of the better players in that league, which is amazing considering the gap in physical maturity between an eight-year-old and a 12-year-old,” Keller said. “He could dribble exceptionally well with both hands. He would come down the court so fast, and then pull up with a dramatic quick stop. I remember those big feet in white basketball shoes [Converse All Stars].”

Pete made a big impression, but he didn’t cut a very imposing figure. He was short and scrawny for his age, but Press made sure to develop Pete’s confidence while hoping his body would someday catch up.

“I knew I had to get Pete to master the fundamentals,” Press told a reporter. “But fundamentals can be dull. I learned to watch his face. That was the indicator. For instance, if he was practicing the chest pass, I’d wait until that bored look started creeping onto his face. Then I’d make him switch to,

say, a one-handed pass. I'd watch him again. When he started looking bored, I'd say let's try something different. So we'd go to a behind-the-back pass. It excited Pete, kept his interest, and he practiced it as hard and long as anything else."

Pete's first basketball uniform was green and gold and bore the letters of team sponsor, Duich Amoco, a local gas station.

Observers described young Pete's demeanor as hyper, wide-eyed, and wired up. Keller remembered an incident in which their Bidy coach, Tom Diaddigo, called a timeout in the fourth quarter of a game to give instructions to Pete.

"Tom was telling Pete something," recalled Keller. "I really don't know what he told Pete, but Pete snapped back. I am pretty sure he swore. I know it was disrespectful. Tom then said something back to Pete, who got really scared. If I had to guess, I would say that Tom told Pete that he was going to talk to Press."

According to Keller, Pete panicked and pushed open the gym doors and ran into the school's darkened hallway. Diaddigo instructed his team to find "that smart-mouth kid" and bring him back to the gym. A search party of parents and players fanned out and eventually discovered Pete trembling in the closet of a second-story classroom.

"Pete was brought back into the gym and sat down on the bench, where he stayed while the game was finally completed," Keller said.

The playoffs and finals of the Bidy league were moved from the New Sheffield gym to a larger venue at Aliquippa High. For Richard Lewis, who played with Pete on the Duich Amoco team, the high school's showers were a luxury. He lived in a home with only a bathtub. In the finals, with Press helping out, Duich Amoco beat C & L Supermarket. Pete had his first championship.

Lewis often visited the Maravich home and, on the surface, it seemed quite normal. Mrs. Maravich would mix up a batch of Kool-Aid as Richard, Ronnie, and Pete (who already hated to lose) played hoops in the driveway. But Press created a dynamic that was disconcerting. "I remember feeling really sorry for Ronnie, since it was so apparent—even to someone my age—that Pete was his dad's favorite," recalled Lewis. "Not that he went easy on Pete. Not at all. He was lucky that he had in Pete a boy who had as much desire to excel as Press had to push him mercilessly. When it was time for me to go home to dinner, they would still be going at it hot and heavy."

In just a year, the constant drilling made a huge difference in Pete's game, noted Michael Keller.

"He was very sure of himself," said Keller. "When we got back together

in the winter of 1956, Pete was nine. We were doing a simple layup drill. Pete was immediately in front of me, awaiting the pass from the rebounder, when he turned around and said, 'Mike, this is getting boring. Watch what I'm going to do.' He received this pass, drove in, jumped up, spun around 360 degrees, and laid the ball right in. I do know one thing: nine-year-old kids didn't shoot like that in 1956."

Press had his plate full with the Aliquippa High School team. He sent out letters to the parents of his players instructing them on everything from bed times, conditioning, specific diet, and meal times ("Have mother make this three hours before game time"). He organized a team field trip to New York's Madison Square Garden to watch a double header. In the first game the Harlem Globetrotters squared off against their perennial patsies, the Washington Generals, while the second game featured the Knicks, coached by Joe Lapchick, against a traveling team of college all-stars. It was a formidable squad that included future professional players like Louisiana State's Bob Pettit, Furman's Frank Selvy, Kentucky's Frank Ramsey, Maryland's Gene Shue, and Iona's Richie Guerin.

Press used specific conditioning drills, according to future NFL Hall of Famer Mike Ditka, who played for Press on the Aliquippa varsity. "He used to run us up and down the steps and all around the gymnasium. He put that steely look on you and you knew he meant business. He made you aware of what was important and he demanded that you do it that way."

"He was very precise in everything he did," added longtime friend Joe Pukach, who played under Press at Davis & Elkins and was one of his assistants at Aliquippa High. "And you practiced that way for him. He was so perfect in everything he did, and the way he presented it to you."

Even though he never liked playing for Paul Birch, Press seemed to emulate his former, super-intense coach. Keller remembered a stinging loss (71-49) to rival Midland that had Press's blood boiling.

"Press was so upset at his team that after the game his players got off the bus at Aliquippa High School and he marched them into the gym and conducted a two-hour practice until about midnight," Keller recalled.

To keep his emotions in check, Press developed a peculiar habit of chewing on towels during games.

Press's first Aliquippa High team (1954-55) rang up a respectable record of 11-11, and improved to 15-7 in his second year. By the end of that season it was clear he was ready for a new challenge. He caught wind of a head coaching position at Clemson College in South Carolina and sent out a

resume. Clemson was a member of the burgeoning Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and Press was extremely eager to coach there, as were over a hundred other applicants. Press drove to South Carolina to personally make his case to Clemson's athletic director Frank Howard.

"Why should I hire you, Yank?" Howard asked.

Press, no slouch in the self-confidence department, told Howard he was simply the best man for the job. They never broached the topic of compensation.

Two months later, when he was offered the position, Press was stunned to learn he had to accept a \$2,000 annual cut in pay—a fact that didn't appeal to Helen. Press accepted Clemson's offer of \$96 per week.

Western Pennsylvania was, and remains, the breeding ground for scores of superb football players, including Johnny Unitas, Tony Dorsett, Mike Ditka, Joe Montana, Larry Brown, Dan Marino, Ty Law, and Joe Namath. Even the local NFL franchise, the Steelers, is named after the product and industry that drew many immigrants to the region. Those hard, loud, soot-filled communities also produced Press Maravich—a creative basketball visionary who hoped to transfer his dream of hardwood brilliance into his child.

One day, not long before the Maraviches left Pittsburgh for South Carolina, Press took Pete aside, "You've seen me do my summer camps, and teach kids how to play basketball, right? I want you to know, your mother and I can't afford to send you to college. But with my teaching and many hours of practice, you could possibly earn a scholarship that would pay for your education. And you know what? If you really become good, you might even play pro basketball like I did, and they'll pay you for doing it!"

Then came the kicker.

"And then you might play in the world championship game, and if you win that game, they'll give you a big diamond ring . . . and on that day, they'll say Peter Press Maravich is one of the best 12 players in the world."

A basketball scholarship, a professional career, and a world championship ring became young Pete's three obsessions as the Maravich family migrated south. He was just nine years old.

# Career Statistics: NCAA and NBA

## LOUISIANA STATE

YEAR	G	PTS	PPG	FGM	FGA	FG%
1967-68	26	1,138	43.8	432	1,022	.423
1968-69	26	1,148	44.2	433	976	.444
1969-70	31	1,381	44.5	522	1,168	.447
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>3,667</b>	<b>44.2</b>	<b>1,387</b>	<b>3,166</b>	<b>.438</b>

YEAR	FTM	FTA	FT%	AST	APG	RB	RBG
1967-68	274	338	.811	105	4.0	195	7.5
1968-69	282	378	.746	128	4.9	169	6.5
1969-70	337	436	.773	192	6.2	164	5.3
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>893</b>	<b>1,152</b>	<b>.775</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>6.4</b>

## NCAA DIVISION I BASKETBALL RECORDS

- Highest scoring average, career: 44.2
- Highest scoring average, season: 44.5
- Most points career: 3,667
- Points season: 1,381
- Games scoring 50 or more, career: 28
- Games scoring 50 or more, season: 10
- Consecutive games scoring 50 or more: 3
- Games scoring 40 or more, career: 56
- Field goals made, career: 1,387
- Field goals made, season: 522
- Field goals attempted, career: 3,166
- Field goals attempted, season: 1,168
- Free throws made, 3-year career: 893
- Free throws attempted, 3-year career: 1,152
- Free throws made, game: 30 (of 31, 12/22/69)
- Combined points, two players from opposing teams: 115 (Maravich 64, Issel 51; and 2/21/70)

All single season marks were set during Maravich's senior year, 1969-70. The three consecutive 50-plus games occurred in Maravich's junior year on February 10, 12, and 15, 1969.

# Game-by-Game Scoring at LSU

Pete Maravich's career scoring average of 44.2 points per game is considered one of sport's untouchable records. The next highest career average is nearly 10 points behind him (Austin Carr's 34.6).

The mark is even more amazing when one considers it was set before the introduction of the three-point line or the shot clock. Game charts reveal that Maravich hit nearly eight (7.8) shots per game from behind the three-point distance of 19 feet, 9 inches while at LSU.

Average Pete Maravich college game: 38.1 FG attempted, 16.7 FG made, 13.9 FT attempted, 10.8 FT made, 6.4 rebounds, 5.1 assists, 44.2 points.

- Led nation in scoring, 1968, 1969, 1970
- Unanimous selection First Team All-American, 1968, 1969, 1970
- College Player of the Year, 1970
- Naismith Award, 1970

## Sophomore (1967-68) Record: 14-12; 8-10 in SEC

Date	Opponent	FG-A	FG%	FT-A	REB	AST	PTS	LSU-OPP
12/2	Tampa	20-50	.400	8-9	16	4	48	97-81
12/4	at Texas	15-34	.441	12-16	5	5	42	87-74
12/9	Loyola (New Orleans)	22-43	.512	7-11	9	4	51	90-56
12/15	at Wisconsin*	16-40	.400	10-13	9	6	42	94-96
12/16	Florida State*	17-41	.415	8-10	5	9	42	100-130
12/19	Mississippi	17-34	.500	12-13	11	3	46	81-68
12/22	Mississippi State	22-40	.550	14-16	8	3	58	111-87
12/30	Alabama	10-30	.333	10-11	6	5	30	81-70
1/3	Auburn	20-38	.526	15-17	9	1	55	76-72
1/6	at Florida	9-22	.409	14-17	10	8	32	90-97
1/8	at Georgia	14-37	.378	14-17	11	5	42	79-76
1/11	at Tulane	20-42	.476	12-15	5	8	52	100-91
1/24	Clemson	14-29	.483	5-6	6	2	33	104-81
1/27	Kentucky	19-51	.373	14-17	11	2	52	95-121
1/29	Vanderbilt	22-57	.386	10-15	6	3	54	91-99
2/3	at Kentucky	16-38	.421	12-15	8	3	44	96-109
2/7	Tennessee	9-34	.265	3-3	6	0	21	67-87
2/7	at Auburn	18-47	.383	13-13	6	1	49	69-74
2/10	Florida (OT)	17-48	.354	13-15	7	3	47	93-92

# The Pistol's 25 Greatest Games

Pete Maravich competed in 688 NBA games (including playoff and All-Star appearances) and 83 varsity NCAA games. The authors believe he was at his best as a pro, as evidenced by this Top 25 list.

## *1. February 25, 1977, New York at New Orleans*

In front of 11,033 in the Superdome and a massive television audience in New York, Pete bedazzled the Knicks by dropping 68 points (along with 6 assists) before fouling out with 1:18 remaining. The Jazz racked up an easy victory and Pete produced one of the NBA's legendary performances.

## *2. March 18, 1977, New Orleans at Phoenix*

Before the game, five Jazz players were injured in a car accident. With just seven players in uniform, Pete put on an LSU-style show. Playing all 48 minutes, he compiled 51 points, 4 assists, 6 rebounds, 5 steals, and 2 blocks in an improbable 104-100 victory.

## *3. April 8, 1973, Boston at Atlanta*

Pete's career-playoff-high 37 points led all scorers in Atlanta's 97-94 win over the Boston Celtics (who held the NBA's best record). Pete also recorded 7 rebounds, 5 assists, 3 steals, and 1 turnover.

## *4. March 8, 1969, LSU at Georgia*

In a legendary double-overtime win in a jam-packed gymnasium in Athens, Pete scored 58 points but none more dramatic than his final two. After avoiding Bulldog defenders with a Globetrotter-esque dribbling exhibition, the Pistol flipped up a 35-foot hook shot that swished through the net as time expired.

## *5. October 26, 1975, New York at New Orleans*

The "Pistol" and the "Pearl" battle it out in the brand new Superdome. When the smoke cleared, Pete had 45, Earl 36, and the Jazz won by 11. New York hacked Pete all night (Walt Frazier, Phil Jackson, and Earl Monroe fouled out), and Pete converted 23 of 26 free throws (both career highs in the pros) along with 8 assists and 11 rebounds.

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# Index

- Aaron, Hank (Henry), 156, 218  
ABA (American Basketball Association),  
171–76, 270–71  
Abbott, Jesse, 286  
Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem, 264, 269, 287–89,  
291, 296, 311, 338, 387, 427  
1975–76 All-NBA first team, 269  
on Maravich, 387  
and Oscar Robertson, 288, 291  
*See also* Alcindor, Lew  
Abrams, Billy, 72–73, 76, 94  
Adams, Alvan, 123, 287  
Adams, Don, 237  
Adelman, Rick, 109, 111  
AFL (American Football League), 171  
Aguirre, Mark, 320  
*Ahead of the Game* (Williams), 234  
Ainge, Danny, 141  
Albanese, Joe, 362  
Albright, Bob, 50  
Alcindor, Lew, 47, 84, 108  
college career, 96, 103, 107, 114, 133, 143  
Milwaukee Bucks contract, 171, 175, 176  
NBA career, 179, 187–88, 196, 199, 206  
*See also* Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem  
Alford, Steve, 369  
Ali, Muhammad, 156, 402  
All-Americans, high school (*Parade*), 47, 50  
All-College Tournament (1968), 122–26  
All-College Tournament Hall of Fame, 382  
Allen, Forrest “Phog,” 106  
Allen, Woody, 262  
Alston, Rafer, 404–405  
AND1, 404, 411  
Anderson, Dave, 186, 233  
Anderson, Rev. Ernest, 5  
Andre, Lee, 218  
Appleby, Ryan, 404  
Archibald, Nate “Tiny,” 226, 289, 291, 328,  
333, 336, 398  
1975–76 All-NBA first team, 269  
Campbell College Basketball School, 116  
NBA Rookie of the Year, 198, 199  
Arenas, Gilbert, 404  
Arizin, Paul, 289, 422  
Arledge, Roone, 186  
Armstrong, Louis, 315  
Arnold, Billy, 86  
Arthurs, Johnny, 126  
Ashley, Carl, 126  
Ashton, Wendell, 314, 316  
Athletes in Action, 81–83, 138–39  
*Athlon Sports*, 400  
Atkinson, Paul, 88, 92  
Atlanta Hawks  
1970 rookie camp, 180, 182, 184–86  
1970–71 season, 187–200  
1971–72 season, 201–13  
1972–73 season, 214–28  
1973–74 season, 229–43  
fan reaction to Maravich trade, 241–42  
Maravich contract negotiations, 173–77  
Maravich NBA debut, 183, 186, 187–88  
Maravich trade (“Louisiana Purchase”),  
239–40, 242–43, 260  
team chemistry, 181–86, 188–93, 195–96  
ticket sales, 179, 192, 200, 235  
Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), 15, 22  
Attles, Al, 267  
Attner, Paul, 310  
Auerbach, Red, 121, 312, 325, 327, 337  
on Maravich, 291, 312, 328, 335  
Maurice Stokes Memorial All-Star  
Game, 180–81  
Awtry, Dennis, 358  
Bach, John, 109, 111–12  
Bagley, Larry, 71–72  
Bagwell, Howard, 22, 24, 25, 27, 29, 56  
Bagwell, Joyce, 81  
Bahnsen, David “Bo,” 348–49  
Bakker, Jim and Tammy, 358

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