

## LONNIE WRIGHT OF SOUTH SIDE HIGH SCHOOL

It takes a special set of talents to be considered the greatest high school athlete in the history of the state's largest city.

Lonnie Wright was all that and more in Newark, where he was a multi-sport superstar at South Side High (the current Malcom X. Shabazz) and later a professional football and basketball athlete at the same time, something that had only been done by two other people.

Not only that, after his playing days, he was an important executive at New Jersey's largest medical school, also located in his home city, where he played an instrumental role in developing thousands of careers.



At South Side, where he graduated in 1962, he was All-State and All-American in both football and basketball. When the Star-Ledger ranked the state's Top 50 High School Athletes of the 20th Century, he placed fifth on the list.

He quarterbacked the football team that went 7-0-1 during his senior year, which was the best record in a program history that dated back to 1913. The Bulldogs also won the Newark City League that season.

His stardom carried over to the basketball court, where that winter as a guard he led South Side to the Essex County tournament title.

During his time at South Side, he also played track and baseball.

Despite earning all of those local bragging rights, he remained a very humble person.

He earned a scholarship to Colorado State, where he excelled in basketball and track. Since freshmen in those days were ineligible in basketball, his freshman focus was on track and field, where he promptly broke the school record in the shot put.

Once he could join the varsity hoops team, he totaled 1,246 points and led the team to a NCAA tournament appearance as a senior, when the



field was limited to 22 teams. Along the way, he was named an Honorable Mention All-America.



Even though he hadn't played football since high school, was signed by the Denver Broncos out of college. The next year, the Denver Rockets (the precursor to the Nuggets) formed as an expansion team in the American Basketball Association, and he signed on.

He played the 1967 and '68 seasons with the Broncos as a defensive back.

He played three seasons with Rockets and two with the Miami Floridians, averaging 10.6 points for his career.

Even though his sports career was winding down in the early '70s, his true calling in life was just beginning.

For more than 35 years, he worked at the University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark, where his job was to recruit medical students, most of them minorities. He was a guiding force and mentor to those young people, whose numbers were estimated to be in the thousands. They are doctors and other professionals today, and can point to Lonnie Wright as a life coach for helping to get them there.

He died in 2012 at age 67. Among his survivors was his wife Johanna, the legendary girls basketball coach at Columbia High School.

He was a 1997 inductee into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame, in its second year of existence. He was one of the first non-coach/administrators to receive the honor.

