

Johnny greets fellow Altoonan Doug West before a 1990 NBA game in San Antonio.

Johnny Moore:

Altoona's First NBA Player Proud to be a Pioneer

by Neil Rudel

Through the pages of the rich basketball tradition in the city of Altoona that has mushroomed during the last 25 years, through all the great players at Altoona High School and Bishop Guilfoyle, through the memorable games at the Jaffa Mosque, there is still one name that stands out: Johnny Moore.

Perhaps not for what he accomplished in high school as there were scores of play-

ers before and since more physically developed and more prolific, but for what he did once he left.

Blair County's first NBA player, Moore played eight years with the San Antonio Spurs, a perennial playoff team during his tenure. He remains the club's all-time leader in assists and popularity, having been voted to the Spurs' all-time team.

But most gratifying to him is the legacy he

left in his hometown, which has since seen two other players, Doug West and Mike Iuzzolino, follow in his footsteps.

"I have a very special feeling about that, but I understand what pioneering is all about," Moore said recently from his home in San Antonio. "We always benefit from somebody else's hard work. Unfortunately, the situation happened to my brother (Bill), who possibly was the great-

est player to come out of Altoona. At least at that stage he was. Randy Allen. Jim Curry. Because of the examples they set and doors they opened, I could look at the choices they made and could avoid the pitfalls.

"I feel particularly honored to help channel that ground into a Dougy West and then Mike Iuzzolino coming along. It gives me pride to be able to have opened doors that people can say 'he did it.' It helps you be able to relate when you know somebody who's been there."

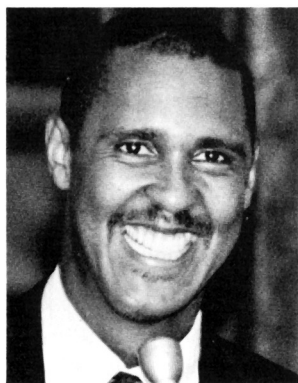
Moore, though, would rather not view from the top. He still looks up to the people who encouraged him along the way — especially parents Bill and June.

"My mother was the one who really encouraged and gave us a lot of strength," Moore said. "My father was there to provide for us and was there for the disci-



Johnny holds high school coach John Swogger (left) and junior high coach Tony Labriola (right) in high regard.

JOHNNY MOORE



Age: 36

Sport: Basketball.

High School: Altoona Area.

College: University of Texas.

Hall of Fame Achievement:

Played nine seasons in the National Basketball Association, including eight with the San Antonio Spurs. Named to San Antonio's all-time team, and remains the club's all-time leader in assists.

Current Occupation: Community relations department, San Antonio Spurs.

Current Residence: San Antonio, Texas.

pline aspect. They represented balance in our life. We didn't get too much of one or the other. People would tell me I would never play high school ball and I can remember my mother telling me I could do whatever I want to do, and I can remember seeing my pop at Little League games and that meant a lot to me."

Athletically, though, his brother Billy impacted him most. Johnny remembers going to the Mosque when he was in elementary school and seeing his brother own the pivot and clean the glass as the strongest player Altoona ever had.

"Initially through the success he experienced," Moore said. "I wanted to do the same thing he did. At that time, I remember when they played Schenley and Schenley had Maurice Lucas, Ricky Coleman, Jeep Kelly and I thought Bill handled Maurice Lucas, and I can remember how excited I was to see that and how proud I was of my brother."

All of Moore's coaches along the way left a mark. He recalls his Little League coach, Max Gates, and coach Harold Young from Garfield Elementary, and it saddened him on a visit a couple of years ago to see they had closed the school.

"You know all the best player came from Garfield," he said, laughing.

Tony Labriola coached Moore at Keith

and the two are still close.

"When I look back on coach Labriola," Moore said, "I realize how much he impacted my life. He taught us to not only respect yourself but others. He gave us the knowledge of the game at an early age, and he genuinely cared about you. A lot of coaches have their own agenda, but Tony Labriola genuinely cared about each and every player. That had a big impact on the way I deal with people."

Moore was so frail as a sophomore — he began kindergarten at the age of 4 — that high school coach John Swogger called him "Peep Peep."

Moore took the kidding in stride.

"Coach Swogger's work ethic taught me a lot about working hard and preparing yourself in the right way," Moore said. "He used to give us all these corny clichés, that your attitude determines your attitude, but they're true. I've known millions of guys with talent that didn't have the right attitude."

As a senior, Moore was not heavily recruited and was ticketed for Providence before an impressive appearance in the Dapper Dan Roundball caught the eye of Texas coach Leon Black, who was replaced after one year by Abe Lemons.

Though Moore, who didn't turn 18 until after his freshman year at Texas, started

to mature physically — he grew two inches and gained 15 pounds his first season — the relationship between he and Lemons took time.

"It was a growing experience and anytime you have growth you have pain," he said. "I was young, 2,000 miles from home and I wasn't going to take any stuff from anybody. I had a little bit of a chip on my shoulder and I remember Abe telling me I wasn't going to be as good as I could be until I got the chip off my shoulder. I had to change some things and I think I grew from the experience. I love Abe Lemons."

Lemons, Moore's Hall of Fame presenter, said, "It took a while to get his attention."

In time, though, Moore accepted the role of the point guard and began to thrive.

"Sometimes it's hard because it looks like you're trying to make a star out of somebody else," Lemons said. "John was not receptive at first, but he learned a lot and it helped him down the line. A lot of people don't appreciate a good guard. They don't understand he's the guy who makes it go. A guard is a guy who runs the team. You can't give a good team if you don't have a good guard."

In time, Moore became the team leader, the guy Lemons relied on.

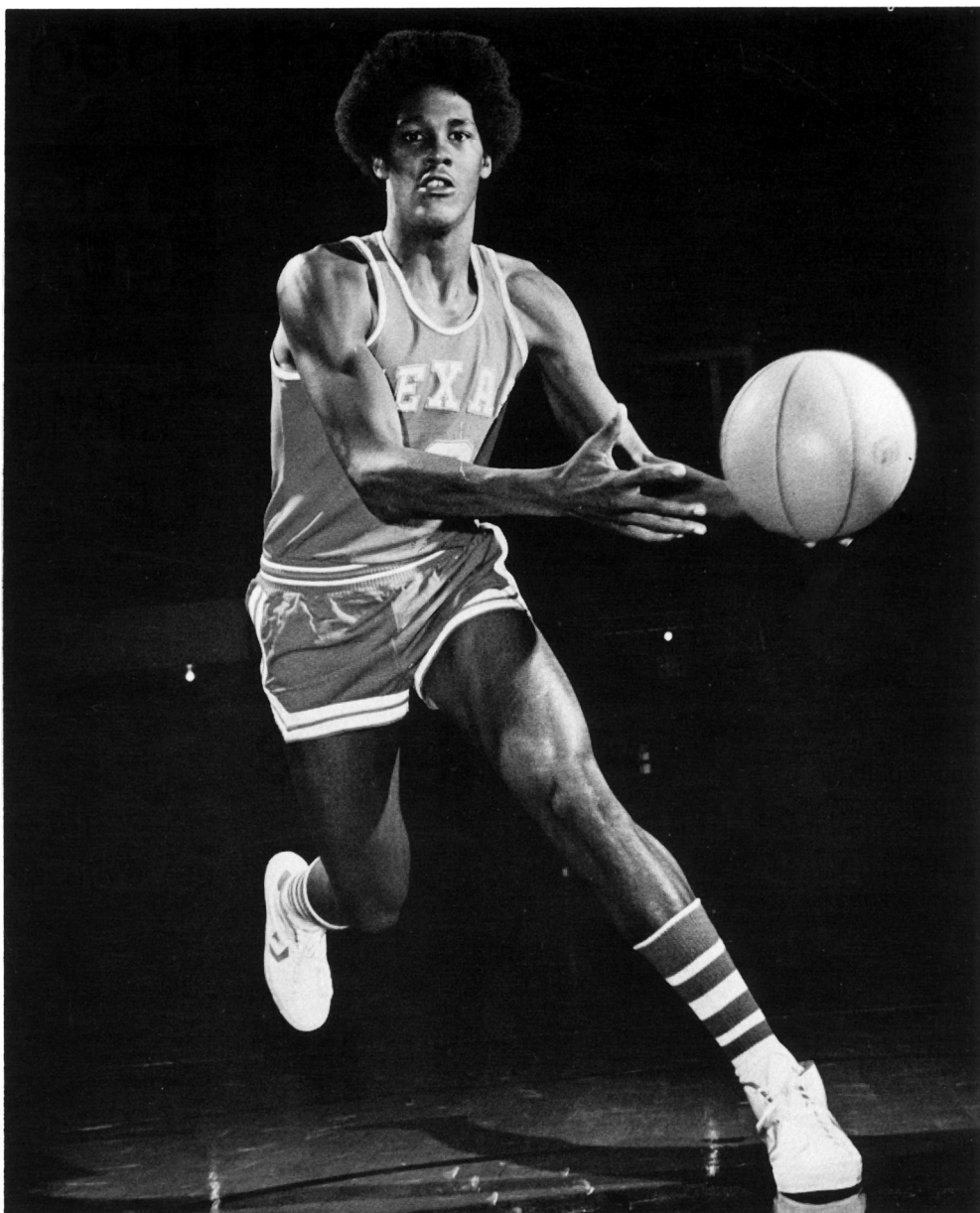
"I didn't have a lot of rules," Lemons said. "John kind of looked after the other players. If I needed to make a move, I'd go through John."

The highlight of Moore's tenure at Texas was winning the NIT title as a senior in 1978 at Madison Square Garden. The Longhorns whipped North Carolina State in the championship game and teammates Jim Krivacs and Ron Baxter shared most valuable player honors. But Lemons isn't sure the trophy went to the right guys.

"We wouldn't have made without John," he said. "He was so unselfish. Anyone of those three kids could have been MVP."

Moore ranks the NIT title at the top of his athletic memories.

"That was a highlight at any level," he said, "because at that time, I experienced what a team is all about, having the chemistry and the esprit de corps to win a championship. If you looked at us on paper, you'd laugh, but we each understood our roles and played well together."



Johnny led Texas to the 1978 NIT title.

Moore maintained his selfless reputation with the Spurs, but was a good enough offensive player to average 9.5 points in 462 career games. His best season came in 1982-83 when the Spurs advanced to the NBA Western Conference finals, losing to the Lakers, and Moore averaged 12.5 in the regular season and 22.5 in 11 playoff games. Moore had several 30-plus point games against Denver in the playoffs.

"Johnny could shoot a lot better than people gave him credit for," Lemons said.

But his value, he knew, was as a floor leader; nobody got the ball to their scorer better than Moore got it to George Gervin.

"Point guard isn't a position, it's a frame of

mind," Moore said. "I see a lot of people who can handle the ball and bring it up the court, but they don't have a point guard frame of mind. You have to know tempo, who's hot, who's not. Once I realized I could destroy a team and not score, that helped me."

Though his career was cut short by a rare form of meningitis — "I feel I didn't accomplish everything I wanted to" — Moore can look back with fond memories. He currently is employed in San Antonio's community relations department.

"I feel good in that I've had an opportunity to experience the highest level," he said. "Basketball has been so good to me. It helped me get a college education, a pro career and a great start on life."