

Thomas Donald Black was born in La Crosse, Wisconsin to Donald and Louise Black in 1941. Sadly, Tom passed away in Missoula, Montana at the age of 76 in 2017.

Tom was the second of seven siblings in the Black family. It is ironic that Tom was born in 1941 because the University of Wisconsin won its only NCAA mens basketball championship that same year.

He was bigger than life and stood 6 feet and 10 inches and weighted 220 pounds. Tom was a gentle giant and had many interests outside of basketball. He was quick of wit and very intelligent.

His family, including son Craig, grandson Eli and daughter-in-law Brandi of Seattle, were special to him. He loved his wife, Eileen and lived out his retirement in Ovando, Montana. As an outdoorsman, he enjoyed everything about Big Sky country and was a celebrity in the northwest USA.

Tom and five older siblings attended eight years of grade school in a one room school in the West Salem School District called Oakhurst School. After school and in the summer months, Tom explored the coulees, bluffs and streams of the region near the family home on county road B. That home was built over a three year period by the entire family. Tom often told the story of digging the basement by hand.

After graduation from Oakhurst School in 1955, Tom went to West Salem High School, then located on Garland Street. There was some drama for Tom when it came time to choose a high school. The Black homestead was right on the boundary of the Logan High School and West Salem High School districts. Ultimately, Tom chose West Salem, a decision he told everyone he was happy to have made. Tom was a proud member of the West Salem Class of 1959 and attended many class reunions over the years. He credits West Salem High School with his continuous desire to learn and cultivate his basketball skills through then coach Mr. Moran. Between 1955 and 1959, West Salem competed in the Coulee Conference which included Bangor, Melrose, Onalaska, Holmen, Trempealeau and Galesville.

Some highlights of Tom's Panther career included:

At the time of his graduation, Tom was the leading basketball scorer in West Salem High School history.

Epic battles in the 1958-59 season took place between West Salem and Trempealeau and West Salem and Galesville. Tom scored 44 points against Galesville on 22 of 24 attempts.

In 1959, against Trempealeau and their star player, Ken Beran, Tom broke the single season scoring record.

In the 1958-59 season, Tom scored 51 points against Melrose, a record that stood for 51 years.

Remember, in Tom Black's day there was no three point shot or shot clock.

Upon graduation from West Salem in 1959, Tom was awarded a basketball scholarship to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He enrolled in the College of Engineering, a tough academic program for a Division I basketball player.

While at UW-Madison, he was approached by Marlboro cigarettes to be their first Marlboro man for their commercials. He had just the appearance they were looking for; a tall, man's man that looked good in a ten gallon hat, cowboy shirt and pressed Levi's. But, on principle he turned them down because he was not a proponent of smoking.

After two years as a Badger, Tom and two of his teammates transferred to South Dakota State University in Brookings, South Dakota. Tom blossomed at SDSU and was inducted into the Jackrabbits Hall of Fame in 2013. That same year was also the 50th anniversary of Tom and his teammates winning the 1963 College Division National Championship. While at SDSU, Tom had some epic games against North Dakota and their tall man, Phil Jackson. Phil later coached the great Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers teams and won numerous NBA Championships.

Tom graduated from South Dakota State in 1964, and was the 72nd pick in the 1964 NBA Draft by the then Baltimore Bullets. He played semi-pro basketball for the Phillips 66 Oilers in Bartlesville, Oklahoma between 1964 and 1966 and with Akron Goodyear in 1967.

In 1968, he was invited to try out for the United States Mens Olympic Basketball Team, which played in Mexico during the summer of 1968. He traveled all over the world in exhibition games, but was the last player cut, much to his disappointment. The U.S. team went on to win the gold medal at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City.

In 1970, Tom had the distinction of being the oldest rookie to sign an NBA contract. He signed with the Seattle SuperSonics (now the Oklahoma City Thunder) and played two years in the NBA. During his stint with the SuperSonics, Tom had the privilege to play against Kareem Abdul Jabbar in Milwaukee. He scored 12 points against Jabbar, the NBA's all-time leading scorer, in a game his family was lucky enough to attend.

After his time with the SuperSonics, he was traded to the Cincinnati Royals (now the Sacramento Kings). He played under legendary coach Bob Cousy for a year before ending his NBA career due to a severe back injury. While in Cincinnati, he was roommates with MLB Hall of Famer, Johnny Bench of the Big Red Machine.

Upon retirement from the NBA, Tom joined Allen Bradley as a sales representative living in Seattle and covering the Pacific Northwest. He was a top sales executive because of his product knowledge and outgoing personality. Most of Tom's major accounts were in Seattle and Portland, Oregon. Once his boss was going over his expense account and noted that Tom spent 70 percent of his time in Montana. He asked Tom why he spent so much time there, and he replied with tongue in cheek, that there was great potential in Montana. The truth was that Tom could not get enough of western Montana. He knew every mountain range, back road and river. Rather than hunt wildlife, he chose to photograph it.

After retiring at age 59 in 2000, Tom and his wife Eileen moved from Seattle to the small town of Ovando in western Montana. He acquired land and rehabbed a log home that overlooks the snow-covered mountains.

Along with his brother Jerry Black of Portland, Oregon and the West Salem class of 1961, Tom ran and hosted the Logger's Show at the annual Washington State Fair in Enumclaw, Washington for over 25 years. Tom secured the best loggers each year to compete for cash prizes before an audience of 5,000 people.

Tom was one of the foremost authorities on the Lewis and Clark Expedition commissioned by Thomas Jefferson in 1804. He knew in detail the daily diary entries written by these two Western explorers, and could easily recount dates and places of interest along the expedition.

In 2005, the state of Montana wanted to commemorate the Bi-Centennial year of Lewis and Clark passing through the state, so they turned to Tom for suggestions on how to draw tourists to the area. He graciously provided the input they needed. In fact, in Tom's adopted hometown of Ovando, there is an overlook he designed that overlooks the "Valley of Knobs" as described in the Lewis and Clark diaries.

Tom was an expert long-handled axe thrower. He could hit the bulls eye from 20 yards every time. An upscale dude ranch near Missoula called PAWS UP got word of his expertise and asked him to entertain their guests and teach them axe throwing. As a result, he taught many celebrities how to throw the axe. Kobe Bryant was a student of Tom's and they became fast friends due to their NBA connection.

Tom recently appeared in a TV episode of "The Housewives of New York City." The housewives came to Paws Up dude ranch in Montana, and Tom was to show these high-heeled big city girls how to live in tents and throw axes. Tom did just that, and it made for a very funny episode.

In his early 70's, Tom, along with his brother Jerry, founded a new business called "Wing One." They patented, produced and sold clay target throwers through outdoor sporting retailers. The product was so well accepted that Tom and Jerry sold the business to a major corporation within just four years.

Tom said that he was asked thousands of times by people, mostly ladies, how tall he was and "How was the weather up there?" He would always reply with, "Let's not talk about how tall I am, but how good looking I am."

Lastly, this honor given by West Salem High School, ranks among the top honors he has received in his life. If he were here, it would be a high honor and would surely bring a tear to the eyes of the 6 foot 10 inch gentle giant and cowboy.

Thank you all from his family. Tom lived a rich, full life and we thank all those from the area that remembered Tom with memorials nearly 60 years after he left the region.

Submitted by Donna Black Hawthorne, sister of Tom Black.