

Nelson receives degree from UI



Former Iowa basketball player Don Nelson officially became a graduate of the University of Iowa during a commencement held Saturday, May 12, 2012, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa — Don Nelson's graduation ceremony was everything he envisioned it being.

Fifty years have passed since Nelson last suited up in an Iowa basketball uniform, but the Hawkeyes' 11th all-time leading scorer was at Carver-Hawkeye Arena on Saturday to finally receive his Bachelor's degree in Physical Education, something he came 10 credits short of obtaining before his decorated career in pro basketball both as a player and later as a coach began.

With family and friends at his side, Nelson was among the first to be recognized during the UI's spring commencement.

"I had been waiting for this moment for a long, long time,"

Nelson said.

During the past half-century, Nelson was motivated to get the remaining credits he needed. Nelson thought he had initially fulfilled his Spanish requirement while he played for the Boston Celtics, a team he won five NBA titles with and has his No. 19 retired by. However, Nelson was later told he only fulfilled six of the eight credit hours he needed.

Years went by and Nelson was now in the midst of his coaching career, one that saw him become the NBA's all-time winningest coach on April 7, 2010. While coaching the Golden State Warriors, he took care of the remaining hours he needed with Spanish through correspondence courses. All that remained were credits for practice teaching, but the time Nelson needed to fulfill that requirement wasn't there with him working a job that required his attention year round.

When he finally stepped away from coaching for good, Nelson turned his attention to fulfilling that final requirement. As it turned out, he was informed his 35 seasons coaching in the NBA would be more than enough.

"They said just prove that you took the Spanish, so we called the colleges and they sent in the transcripts and here I am today," Nelson said.

Nelson also said he found inspiration from former NBA center Shaquille O'Neal, who he coached during the 1994 FIBA World Championships in Toronto. O'Neal only played two seasons at LSU before jumping to the NBA in 1992, but along the way, he went back to school and not only earned his Bachelor's degree from LSU, but just recently earned a doctoral degree from Barry University in Miami.

"A year ago, I said, 'By golly, if Shaq can do it, I can do it,'" Nelson said. "I was pretty proud of him for doing that and that was some inspiration for me."

The year of 2012 has proven to be both a memorable and busy one for Nelson. In addition to receiving his degree, Nelson will enter the Pro Basketball Hall of Fame on Sept. 7 in Springfield, Mass., as a tribute to all of his accomplishments on the hardwood. He also intends to begin a business endeavor later this year that he declined to give specifics about since it hasn't launched yet.

"What I thought would be a real simple off-year of retirement has been one of the busiest years I've ever had," Nelson said. "Here I am at 72, I thought I'd be winding down, but it has just been the opposite."

As Nelson entered the Hawkeyes' practice gym Saturday to meet assembled media, he had his photo taken with a frame of his No. 15 uniform at Iowa, one that included a picture of him from his days as a Hawkeye, plus a list of all his basketball accolades. When asked if he'd like to have the No. 15 retired someday (the No. 15 is currently worn at Iowa by junior Zach McCabe), Nelson said it'd be up to the university and that it wouldn't affect him either way.

Graduating college may have come later than he originally expected, but Nelson's determination to do so culminated Saturday into a moment he'll always cherish.

"I wish it would have happened 50 years ago, but it didn't," Nelson said. "I think the moral to that story is it's never too late. As long as you keep working and keep having dreams, they can come true."