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FEATURED

## Mexico, Missouri gives Tyronn Lue enthusiastic homecoming

ETHAN MAY Jul 3, 2016



Cleveland Cavaliers' Head Coach Tyronn Lue autographs Travis Fitzwater's Cavaliers jersey Saturday during Lue's welcome home ceremony in Mexico High School. Fitzwater, R-49, represents voters from Fulton south to Jefferson City.

YOUNGRAE KIM

MEXICO, Missouri — Audrain County bills itself as the biofuel capital of Missouri, but on Saturday something entirely different fueled the region: pride.

Tyronn Lue, Mexico-native and head coach of the 2016 NBA Champion Cleveland Cavaliers, was welcomed home Friday by thousands of Missourians proud to claim him as their own.

The Mexico Chamber of Commerce organized a homecoming event to welcome home Lue, who twice-mentioned his hometown on national television after winning the championship on June 19.

The original plans for a parade and outdoor awards presentation were canceled because of rain, but the city was prepared to move the celebration into the Mexico High School gymnasium. Inside, attendees chanted at one another as one side of the gymnasium yelled, "M-E-X," while the other side shouted "I-C-O." The event nearly filled the gymnasium to its maximum capacity of 2,400 people.

The gymnasium nearly shook when Lue arrived shortly after 11 a.m. carrying the Larry O'Brien NBA Championship Trophy, a broad smile on his face. The guest of honor then took a moment to greet a large group of family members sitting near the podium.

One of those family members, Pam Williams, remembered how Lue would hang a clothes hanger over a closet door to use as a basketball hoop. Nothing would stop Lue from practicing basketball, Williams said.

"Rain, snow, sleet or hail, he would play ball in it."

Charles Fry, a friend of Lue's grandmother, was also around to watch Lue grow up. Fry still remembers watching Lue walk down to practice at the basketball court even when temperatures soared.

Dan Erdel, a local attorney, served as the master of ceremonies. He commended Lue for teaching the virtues of faith, courage, hard work, goal-setting and the need to study hard and stay in school. When he finished, the attendees in the gymnasium erupted in applause.

Lue left Mexico after his freshman year of high school. He graduated from Raytown High School in Kansas City, and continued to play basketball at the University of Nebraska.

Mark Scanlon coached Lue at Raytown.

"He was great to coach," Scanlon said. "He was an exceptional talent, but he was also a good team player."

Mitch Sherman, now a reporter for ESPN, covered Lue as a student reporter at the University of Nebraska.

"The way that he ran that team on the court, I'm not surprised he could run a team as a head coach," he said.

After a performance by a children's choir from area churches, Lue stood on Gary Filbert Court as officials came to the podium, one-by-one, to present him with awards.

Lue was made an honorary graduate of Mexico High School by Kevin Freeman, the superintendent of Mexico Public Schools, who also gave Lue an honorary varsity letter.

An intern for the Indiana Pacers, Johnny Carver from Olathe, Kansas, credited Lue for helping teach him basketball. As a young child, Carver attended a camp put on by Lue while he played in the NBA.

"I remember him being really good with kids," Carver said. The day after Lue clinched the championship with the Cavaliers, Carver posted a picture on Twitter that showed Lue holding Carver up to the rim so he could dunk a basketball.

Connie Maxwell-Cox of the Mexico Chamber of Commerce spoke next to announce the creation of the Tyronn Lue Community Day of Service. Representatives of city and county government presented Lue with a key to the city.

Presenting Lue's final award was Travis Fitzwater, a member of Missouri's State Legislature. Fitzwater spoke for Mexico's state representatives, who were unable to attend the event. Fitzwater, a Cavaliers fan, was overjoyed to congratulate the championship-winning coach, and asked him to autograph his jersey.

Like Fitzwater, Larry Brown, Lue's cousin, was also overjoyed to see Lue and the Cavaliers win the championship. Brown ran up and down the hallway in his home when the Cavaliers clinched the title by winning a decisive Game 7 on the road against defending NBA champion the Golden State Warriors. Tyronn Lue is the third NBA coach to win a championship after taking over a team mid-season.

The celebration concluded with Lue giving a speech of his own. The gymnasium was filled with drawn-out howls of "Lue" as the native son approached the microphone.

When the cheers subsided, Lue said he enjoys coming home because Mexico gives him a chance to be normal. The head coach also said being from Mexico has kept him humble.

Lue also took a moment to tell a story about a trip he took to a penitentiary in San Quentin, California. The full gymnasium sat silent as Lue explained how inmates came to him to talk about basketball. Afterward, Lue told the crowd that he shared with the Cavaliers how much seeing so many men unified by sports affected him.

To conclude the event, Lue took a few questions from Mexico school children and signed autographs.

Chad Shoemaker, the director of Parks and Recreation in Mexico, was one of many people who knows Lue and was happy to see him come home.

"He's the kind of person you want your kids to grow up to be," he said.

*Supervising editor is Blake Nelson.*

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**Ethan May**

I'm studying Print & Digital News Editing at the Missouri School of Journalism. You can reach me at [ethanmay@mail.missouri.edu](mailto:ethanmay@mail.missouri.edu)

