Breitbard’s Hall finally catches up to speedy ‘Hambone’

Art “Hambone” Williams was the 1959 Southern California Player of the Year while playing basketball at San Diego High and later played in the NBA. Williams will be inducted into the San Diego Hall of Champions. He is shown here at the Martin Luther King Recreation Center on Friday, Feb. 10, 2012.

Hambone doesn’t like to wait, even if it’s for all good things. Hambone played basketball fast, played it at 100 mph, played it with flash and flair from the blacktop of Memorial Junior High to the parquet floor of Boston Garden. Hambone could play, all right. Hambone could take you any time on any surface, whenever he felt the urge.

Arthur “Hambone” Williams is 72 years old now and doesn’t move around as he once did, driven around most of the time by delightful lady friend Paris Wilmore, but that doesn’t mean he still isn’t as sharp as one of the 2,377 assists he handed out as a professional point guard.

Breitbard Hall of Fame

This is the one of four profiles of the four local athletes to be inducted into the Breitbard Hall of Fame Wednesday night in Mission Valley.

The others:
Monique Henderson: Born to run

C.R. Roberts: West Point’s loss was USC’s big gain

USD the genesis for Bickerstaff’s career

So, when the former San Diego High, City College, Cal Poly Pomona, San Diego Rockets, Boston Celtics, and (ABA’s) San Diego Conquistadors star got word he will be among the class of four to be inducted Wednesday night into the Breitbard Hall of Fame, he could only think of one thing: What took so long?

“I feel good about it in some ways and in some ways I don’t; 37 years is a long time to wait,” says Williams, going back to the final season of his playing days, 1974-1975 with the Conquistadors. “I feel like one of the Tuskegee Airmen. That’s a long time to wait for something I accomplished long ago.”

But he smiles when he says it. Hambone can’t help but smile. He probably smiled when someone gave him one of the great nicknames in the history of sports, although to this day he has no idea why, but it stuck, shortly after he and his family moved to San Diego from Bonham, Texas, in 1953.

“I was at Memorial and some guys were going to play football before home room,” he recalls. “I had just gotten here and didn’t know anybody. They were choosing up sides and some guy hollered out, “Hambone!” They wanted me to play but didn’t know my name. For some reason, I responded to it. Now, if you call me Arthur Williams, I probably won’t answer. Kind of like Meadowlark Lemon.”

His story, of course, is among the more remarkable in the history of organized basketball.

We can start from his days at San Diego High.

“I didn’t even play basketball until 11th grade at San Diego,” he says. “I used to play against Coach (Jerry) Dahms all the time in gym class and I’d beat him all the time. He told me to go out for the team. So I did and we were good; Red Flannery, Jack Henn, Ezell Singleton, the late Bobby Anderson, the late Edward Lee Johnson and Artist Gilbert were on those teams.”

The 1958-59 Cavemen were one of the best teams in the state, and Hambone was first team All-SCIF, which then covered all of Southern California (except for the Los Angeles City Section). But the team would have to forfeit 16 games.

“They found out that the late Otha Phillips was too old to play,” Hambone says with a shrug.

From there it was on to City, where he was brilliant, and then Cal Poly. From there, there was no organized basketball. He worked for General Dynamics in Pomona and played pickup games against the likes of Gail Goodrich, Walt Hazzard, Bob Rule and Jumpin’ Joe Caldwell.

“I used to tell Hazzard to recommend me (to the NBA),” Hambone says. “But he never did. I could play better than he could.”

He injured his hand and, married with a child, dropped out of Cal Poly and went to work. Eventually, 1967 came around, and Hambone was 28 years old when the brand new San Diego Rockets held a
tryout camp. Bob Breitbard owned the team and he remembered Hambone from his high school days, when Williams three times was a Hall of Champions star of the month.

“I never got out of shape; I always stayed in shape,” he says. “So I came down. Jack McMahon was the coach and he found out I was a great assist man. He started cutting guys, but I wasn’t going back home to General Dynamics in Pomona. McMahon gave me some money to move here. I went through the back door, but I came out the front.”

So Hambone played in 238 games with the fledgling Rockets — a remarkable 1,739 minutes his rookie year — through the 1970 season. His big break came prior to the ’70-71 season, when Celtics guru Red Auerbach sent Larry Siegfried to San Diego for Williams. There Hambone played through 1974, appearing in 468 games and got himself a ring when the Celtics won the 1974 NBA title.

Hambone won’t say what happened to that ring and doesn’t like to talk much about his life after basketball. He’s still in San Diego. He’s still getting around.

“I wasn’t doing anything,” he says. “I felt like going somewhere and falling into a hole. That’s when my pride took over. Those were hard times. I went through a divorce and lost my home. I made some mistakes in life. But my momma taught me right. I had six sisters and four brothers, and we all finished high school. It could be worse. I could be dead.”

But he’ll always have basketball. He’ll always have that Celtic pride.

“I can remember Red coming up to me after a game and saying, ‘Hambone, you won that game,’” he says. “A helluva man, Red. We had some great guys. We didn’t fight among ourselves. There was a lot of pride. I still have it. I think I will die with it.

“It was night and day getting traded to the Celtics. I must have had something going for me. I played the same way they played. They played speed ball.”

Waiting never is fast enough for Hambone Williams.

**Correction:** An earlier version of this column had Williams talking about a player named Edward Lee John; it’s actually Johnson. And the column said All-SCIF covered all of Southern California. It was actually all of Southern California except for the Los Angeles City Section.