

ASU

Former ASU basketball player Lester Neal lands first head coaching job at Mesa Community College



Richard Obert

Arizona Republic

Published 9:52 a.m. MT April 12, 2022 | Updated 9:54 a.m. MT April 12, 2022

After 10 years as a junior college basketball assistant coach, Lester Neal is getting his shot to lead a junior college basketball program.

Mesa Community College has hired the former Arizona State forward to lead the men's basketball team.

He is thankful for the MCC leaders and the hiring committee.

"I'm very excited about the opportunity," Neal said. "It took people to believe in me for this opportunity to happen."

Neal was raised in Chicago, played and helped coach at Ventura College, before coming back to the Valley to be an assistant at MCC last season. He is a study on hard work, perseverance and patience.

He wasn't the team's high scorer at ASU but he rarely left the court because of his hustle, doing the little things, such as blocking out for rebounds, and playing defense, to give the Sun Devils a chance to win during his time playing at ASU from 1991-93 for coach Bill Frieder.

Neal played his last two years of college at ASU, and was the team's co-MVP in the 1992-93 season when he averaged nearly 10 rebounds a game, leading the Pac-10. He played eight years of professional basketball overseas and finished his degree at ASU in 2012.

He is inducted into the Ventura College Sports Hall of Fame and the California Community College Men's Basketball Hall of Fame.

"I'd like to share a story about an unsung hero," Neal said. "Everybody is caught up with Steph Curry and shooting 3s. But I want to talk about the guy who doesn't get noticed.

"It may not always show up in the box score, scoring 20 or 30 points. But he's the glue guy that will do all of the little things. Diving on the floor for the ball. Talking to a teammate. Being a leader on and off the court. Those things matter. A guy who is going to play hard. An unsung hero who can take you to an eight-year professional career around the world. It can give you an opportunity to be an assistant coach for 10 years. It can give you an opportunity to be inducted into two Hall of Fames. And it can give you an opportunity to be a head men's basketball coach."

Neal served as an assistant under interim head coach Jimmy Herrera at MCC this past season, when the Thunderbirds won five games coming out of no season in 2020-21 due to the pandemic and on the heels of coach Sam Ballard retiring.

Before that, Neal, a top athlete at Dunbar Vocational High School in Chicago, was an assistant at Ventura College for three years. He also served three years as an assistant at Scottsdale Community College and three years at Chandler-Gilbert Community College.

He has coached at the AAU level, led a program, and has worked with youth and families from low-income households in Arizona.

Neal said he was the first person in his family to graduate from high school and college. He came into junior college as a struggling student academically, he said.

"I learned how to time manage, have study skills," Neal said. "I became a student who went from a 2.0 (grade-point average) to a 3.3. Those are some of the things that I want to share with my players. Invest in the community, excel academically, and, on the court, we're going to have fun, play hard and win some games. My goal is to get these guys matriculated onto a four-year school."

To suggest human-interest story ideas and other news, reach Obert at richard.obert@arizonarepublic.com or 602-316-8827. Follow him on Twitter [@azc_obert](https://twitter.com/azc_obert).

Support local journalism: Subscribe to azcentral.com today