

# My day with Meadowlark Lemon

(As published in *The Oak Ridge's Historically Speaking* column on December 11, 2007)

December 6, 2007 is a day I will not soon forget. It began quite early, much before sunrise, with me locating the two boxes of Second Harvest envelopes that have resided in my garage from one annual Oak Ridge Labor Management Prayer Breakfast to the other for several years. We use those envelopes to encourage attendees to the prayer breakfast to donate to that worthy organization. We collect several hundred dollars each year.

The night before, as I had been chosen to introduce the key note speaker, I had prepared my remarks on Meadowlark Lemon, of Harlem Globetrotter fame. That was fun. Meadowlark is a legendary hero in the world of sports. He was the most popular member of the most beloved sports team in history - the Harlem Globetrotters.

Meadowlark began his career with the Harlem Globetrotters more than five decades ago. Yet, Meadowlark Lemon is one of those household names where, even today, only his first name need be used!

A gifted athlete and hilarious comedian, he was as renowned for his famous confetti-in-the-water-bucket routine as he was for hitting hook shots from half court. Meadowlark's "no-look, wrap-around pass" for an easy slam-dunk and his ability to turn a hapless referee into a foil for his wit is unsurpassed. If you have seen Meadowlark perform on the basketball court, you know what I mean.

If you were fortunate enough to attend the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Oak Ridge Labor Management Prayer Breakfast, you were treated to Meadowlark of today, still a person with a quick wit, but tempered by a devotion to Jesus and a love for kids. From the opening serenade of "Sweet Georgia Brown," Meadowlark's trademark Globetrotter anthem, to the personal testimony, Meadowlark held the audience of well over 450 attendees spellbound for over 40 minutes. When his talk ended, a standing ovation heralded the appreciation from the crowd and one could sense the sentiment in the room that wished he could go on longer.

His style of taking questions from the crowd all through his talk, getting down from the stage to the arena floor to be nearer the crowd, passing the basketball in almost unheard of ways (to say he passed it behind his back is to understate the situation significantly) and the manner in which he balanced humor with sincere appeal to teamwork was quite astonishing to say the least. Meadowlark is a skilled orator and a well seasoned master of comedic timing.

But that was to be just the start of a tremendous day with Meadowlark. After the prayer breakfast, his next stop was The New Hope Center at Y-12. There he was met by a large number of people who were waiting with basketballs, pictures, blank sheets of paper and several other items they wanted him to autograph.

He soon asked to learn something about Y-12. We took him around the Y-12 History Exhibit Hall and explained how the small communities were taken over for the Manhattan Project and how calutrons separated uranium for Little Boy. His questions were good ones. He had not known anything much about Oak Ridge and Y-12 sure was not something of which he was aware. He quickly gained an appreciation for the scope of security at Y-12 and why. He also expressed appreciation for the impact Y-12 has had on the world through the medical isotope program and the nuclear nonproliferation activities.

Meadowlark has a worldview that made him ask, "When are we going to no longer need nuclear weapons? When will we all learn we do not have to agree to get along?" Our response indicated that as long as terrorism existed and we are in danger from another attack similar to 9/11 a strong nuclear deterrent was necessary.

After spending some time at Y-12, we departed for the Oak Ridge National Laboratory for a tour of the supercomputer there and for lunch in the VIP dining room. There we were treated to a spectacular view of the small lake and a water feature that is quite picturesque. First we toured the computer facility. The

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huge screen of some 35 million pixels is quite amazing. But Meadowlark found the autographs on the computer front panel even more appealing. He was asked to place his autograph on the computer panel with Coaches Pearl and Fulmer. Meadowlark's trademark autograph completely covered the top section of the computer panel!

Lunch was a relaxing time for us as the morning had been packed very full. The view from that dining room is truly superb! Meadowlark continued to ask about the facilities and the scientific achievements highlighted on the wall of the dining room served as conversation starters as we attempted to answer all his probing questions about the science.

After the late lunch, we started for Oak Ridge High School. I could feel Meadowlark getting excited. He began to ask questions about Oak Ridge from a kid's perspective. As we drove down the turnpike and Oak Ridge High School came into view, he exclaimed, "What a huge facility – that looks like a college campus, not a high school!"

We were met at the gym by school officials and ushered into the playing area. Meadowlark quickly summed up the Oak Ridge boys as they were taking practice shots. One could obviously see his mind working.

When Coach Pruden brought the girls to the gym, both the boys and the girls sat on the bleachers to allow Meadowlark to talk to them. He spoke quietly, but the ball teams listened intently and heard his every word. Soon, he had two volunteers demonstrating a "chest pass" and he made several observations about how that was done. He kept emphasizing the importance of learning and practicing the basic skills of ball handling.

The kids' eyes grew wide when Meadowlark began to move the ball around and pass behind his back or in a misdirection pass. He captured the team's imagination when he talked to them about the all-time best dunkers in basketball. They asked questions much as the adults had done at the prayer breakfast, but with one clear distinction. One young lady asked Meadowlark if he would attend their game on Friday night. His response was, "If I attend your game, will you come to hear me preach on Sunday?" They struck a deal.

As Meadowlark was leaving and the boys returned to shooting practice shots, he was asked if he still was able to make the famous hook shot. Interestingly enough a basketball came bouncing to Meadowlark about the time this question was asked. His response was, "Yes, I can still make them when I practice."

And with no warning, Meadowlark just spun around and let fly a hook shot from the sideline. It happened so quickly that I could not get my camera up to my eye. The ball swished the bottom of the net and the deed was done. Meadowlark had successfully demonstrated his amazing shooting ability. The few coaches who were paying attention dropped their jaws in amazement. It was truly a surreal moment. None of us who saw that shot could deny it happened, but we truly found it difficult to believe it could be done...especially that easily. WOW, Meadowlark is amazing!

From the high school we went to the Oak Ridge Boys' Club where Meadowlark again adjusted his delivery to the audience. He asked for the boy who was the best shot from beyond the three point line and proceeded to give a thorough coaching session on the importance of making the "soft" shot up close and then moving back from the goal in small increments continuing to make the "soft" shot until you are making the long three-point shots with ease.

At both the school and the boys' club, Meadowlark joined the young people for group photos. He immediately gained their respect and attention. The look in their eyes told it all. They admired a great athlete and performer.

Meadowlark Lemon is world renowned:

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- He earned the Basketball Hall of Fame Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000.
- He's played almost 10,000 games of basketball in his career.
- He was inducted to the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame in 1975.
- He played before the all time largest basketball crowd of 65,000 at Yankee Stadium - 1958
- He was the Captain of the first American basketball team to play in Russia - 1959
- He received the Dr. of Divinity Degree 1998
- He has one of the most recognizable names in the history of basketball.
- Broadcasts of his games are still the highest rated episodes of "The Wide World of Sports."
- He is true to his basketball heritage, and he is still a "globetrotter", traveling every week.
- Even after five decades, he's still not slowing down

My day with Meadowlark was truly one I will not soon forget. Thank you Meadowlark for showing the kids your true love for them and your dedication to Jesus in all you do in your life here on earth. Meadowlark Lemon - a fine example for kids and someone who truly knows exactly how to relate to them.



Meadowlark Lemon speaks to the 10th Annual Oak Ridge Labor Management Prayer Breakfast

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Thomas Zacharia, Director of Oak Ridge National Laboratory's Computing and Computational Sciences Directorate, watches as Meadowlark autographs the Cray XT3 supercomputer named Jaguar - photo by Robert Whitten of ORNL



Meadowlark signs autographs at Y-12's New Hope Center



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Meadowlark with both the girls and boys Oak Ridge High School teams



Meadowlark at the Oak Ridge Boy's Club