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### Legends of the Court

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# Legends of the Court

## *Fans cheer a century of Titan basketball.*

Story by STEW SALOWITZ  
'76

“As soon as this necessary team work is developed and the basket becomes a more familiar spectacle, the team will put up an excellent article of basket ball.”

So predicted the *Argus*, reporting on Illinois Wesleyan’s first men’s basketball game. It’s fair to say that the team has rebounded nicely since that first game, on Jan. 14, 1910, which was lost, 41-32, to Illinois State Normal.

A few days shy of a century later, on Jan. 9, 100 years of men’s basketball at Illinois Wesleyan was

commemorated in the Shirk Center. More than 90 former Titan players were introduced at halftime to the cheers of fans who also witnessed a big win over conference rival Carthage. At a chili supper afterwards, nearly 400 of those fans were treated to a celebration of IWU hoops legends and lore with guest speakers and an open-mic session.

It was Delmar Darrah, a nationally known Masonic leader, who first introduced basketball to Illinois Wesleyan not long after the sport was invented by James Naismith in 1891. When Darrah — who taught elocution and public speaking at IWU — was assigned to head the University’s P.E. program, he wrote Naismith asking for rules and advice on how to launch the sport at Wesleyan. At first, basketball was mostly embraced by girls and young women, but gradually caught on with the boys, officially becoming a men’s varsity sport at the University in 1910.

In their second game, the Wesleyan men defeated Millikin University and continued their progress, winning the state intercollegiate championship in 1912. In the decades that followed, Illinois Wesleyan men’s basketball has been consistently cited among the nation’s best. With an NCAA Division III championship, three national third-place finishes and 27 conference titles, the Titan program is ranked third among all Division III schools in wins (1,460 prior to 2009-10).



**Illinois Wesleyan's first varsity basketball team.**

The 57-year combined coaching careers of former players Jack Horenberger '36 and his protégé Dennie Bridges '61 accounted for 931 of those victories and laid solid groundwork for a program that's produced scores of outstanding players. The tradition continues today under Coach Ron Rose '88, who himself was a letter-winning starting guard for Bridges-coached teams.

My own association with Titan basketball pales in longevity to alumni such as Ed Thetard '44 and Dick Read '44, former players who still attend games regularly. My induction began in 1972, as a lowly freshman perched along the south wall of steamy, noisy Fred Young Fieldhouse.

After graduation, my full-time work in radio allowed me the honor of calling play-by-play for games in Jack Sikma's senior year, when the 1977 IWU graduate and future NBA star was setting school records that remain unbroken — including career points (2,272) and career rebounds (1,405).

My radio career continued through the 1980s, as I got to know the players while hitching rides on road trips to Mobile, Ala., San Diego, Tucson, and garden spots like Waukesha, Wis., and Delaware, Ohio. (Don't worry, former players who might read this — the really good stories are permanently sealed.)

As the University's sports information director since 1988, I've witnessed big baskets, comeback wins and heartbreaking losses. Through it all, I've also seen the consistent devotion of a fan base known throughout the Midwest as among the most rabid, both at home and on the road.



**1967 team members reunited for the celebration, including (from left): Dennis Kagel '69, Steve Laub '67, Don Davidson '67, Bill Patterson '67, Harry Bohn '67 and Coach Dennie Bridges.**

reached 50. He went on to become longtime sports editor of the *Pantagraph* and a nationally known basketball and football official.

Names like Sikma, Bob Hildebrand '52, Dennis Kagel '69, Bryan Crabtree '97 and Korey Coon '00 conjure vivid memories among the Titan faithful. Further back in time are players whose contributions are no less significant. Fred Young, a 1915 graduate for whom the old Fieldhouse was named, led his team to two "Little Nineteen" conference championships, scoring an average 20 points per game in an era when total game scores rarely

Young's post-college career success has been a common path among the Titans. With a winning formula that balances academics with athletics, IWU's men's basketball has produced 14 Academic All-Americans. Both Coon and Keelan Amelianovich '06 were named College Division "Academic All-Americans of the Year," with Coon twice receiving the honor.

The hallowed venues of Memorial Gymnasium, Fred Young Fieldhouse and the Shirk Center have histories that intertwine with the players who labored to build a continuity of excellence. In more recent years, that basketball éclat has also graced IWU's nationally-ranked women's team, which is steadily growing its own avid fan base.

What the next 100 years will bring is anyone's guess. But if the past 10 decades are any indication, Illinois Wesleyan will continue to "put up an excellent article of basket ball," as the *Argus* so accurately predicted back in 1910.

**Stew Salowitz, a 1976 Illinois Wesleyan graduate, handles publicity and maintains Web sites for 18 Titan varsity sports. A native of Normal, Ill., he is the author of four books and was the afternoon personality and a sportscaster for WJBC Radio in Bloomington from 1977-88.**