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ROAD SHOW

We take the bus with some of Titan basketball's biggest fans.

By R.K. Falcone

Photos by Marc Featherly

On a foggy Saturday afternoon in January, a succession of cars ease into the Shirk Center parking lot. Passengers and drivers get out and walk toward a charter bus idling nearby. The bus doors hiss open, revealing a bustle of friendly banter as the people boarding find their seats. A petite, smiling woman is stationed at the top of the steps. Her white hair is accented by thick, green earrings that read “IWU.”

“Hi, Ruth!” declares a passenger as he climbs aboard.

“Hi, John. Ready for another win?” Ruth Barnard and her husband Bill always sit at the front of the bus, ready to greet all who board. They have been responsible for organizing the bus trips that Titan fans take to away basketball games for the past eight years. With Bill at her side, Ruth maintains a bubbly personality as she presides over these road trips with gentle but firm authority: part general, part mother hen. “Expect anything on this bus, and you’ll get it,” she smilingly warns.

As any of the passengers aboard will tell you, the bus makes it easier for fans who may otherwise have difficulty making it to away games. “It’s the old people bus,” laughs Don Winn ’59. “And Ruth is our leader. She may be a little, itty-bitty, old lady, but she keeps us in line.”

It’s a full bus today, ready to head to the home court of conference rival Wheaton College, near Chicago. Fifty-two people are slotted to ride, and Barnard checks to make sure everyone is on board. The bus will make an extra stop in Lexington, Ill., to pick up more passengers. At 3:30 p.m., bus No. 255 maneuvers gently out of the parking lot, heading north.



Ken Camp protests a hard-luck call against the Titans at Wheaton College. Being seated at the railing behind the net allows fans like Camp to exercise their right to free speech — and their vocal cords.

The average age of those riding the fan bus may be toward the upper end of the senior discount range, but the conversations are lively:

“Did you see the game against Augustana? I nearly had a heart attack.”

“You say that every time.”

“I brought the tape of that game. We can watch it on the trip up.”

“Great, I can sweat all over again.”

“Then please don’t sit near me.”

Illinois Wesleyan fans are known for making a strong presence at away games. “The Titan fans will outnumber the fans of the team we are playing, even in Chicago,” says Barnard, who worked in IWU’s Financial Aid office for four years, and whose daughter Deborah Metheny earned a nursing degree from the University in 1971.

The fan support means a lot to Titan players and to their leader, Scott Trost, who took over the head coaching reins from Dennie Bridges ’61 in 2001. “That’s one thing that stands out, the fan support,” says Trost. “We love it.”

Bridges, who is now IWU’s athletic director, recalls how older fans used to catch a ride on the team bus. “We really liked the support, and they never bothered the players.” But as the number of fans grew, Bridges knew it was only a matter of time before they would run out of room for fans to ride with the team.

It was Barnard, then a regular rider on the team bus, who arrived at a solution. “I said to Dennie, ‘You need to charter a bus.’ He said to me, ‘Great idea, Ruth. Go for it.’ And I thought, ‘Uh-oh.’”

“I knew we had a lot of fans who would jump at the chance,” says Bridges. “It’s so great to have their support, but a lot of older fans would never attempt to get into a car and drive up to Chicago for a night game.” That includes Bridges’ own parents, Dudley and Maxine, who have long been regulars on the charter bus.

* * *



The passengers enjoy a moment of quiet contemplation as bus 255 rolls through the rural Illinois landscape

About an hour into the journey, the hazy daylight fades as the passing vista of fallow corn and soybean fields dims into blackness. Barnard decides it's a good time to begin watching the tape of last week's game, a thrilling home match-up against Augustana won by the Titans by a single point. The tape is slid into the bus VCR and the familiar image of the Shirk Center basketball court flickers onto the overhead screens. Barnard gives the order to pass out the treats — bags of miniature candy and individual popcorn bags courtesy of Rex Slagel, who operates the Shirk Center concession stand.

"Rex makes the best popcorn in the world."

"I got a lollipop in my bag!"

"He does that sometimes."

"Can't get popcorn this good anywhere."

Bus chats often turn to favorite moments in IWU basketball history, away and at home. "In the old days, we didn't follow them to the games. It was the Depression, you know," says Helen McNichol Sheldon '40, who explains that she and husband Chet '43 attended Illinois Wesleyan in the "dark ages." Two of her three children graduated from IWU, and Titan sports have always been a family passion. One of the Sheldons' favorite memories was the 1970 game between the Titans and neighbor Illinois State University. It was the last time the two ever played each other, and Bridges led his team to a one-point victory. Helen recalls with a laugh how some IWU students brought a live chicken to the game "and declared it was a scared cardinal" — a satiric reference to ISU's Redbird mascot.

"Now if you're talking about this bus, you have to talk about nationals in Virginia," reminds Vince Beggs '52. The Titans took third place in Division III nationals in 1996 but many didn't expect the team to do as well the following year, having lost several key senior players. Of course, as every Titan fan knows, the team beat the odds, traveling to Roanoke, Va., to claim the national title in 1997. "A bunch of kids, and they won," says Beggs, fondly shaking his head. "I was glad for Dennie that he was there to get that."

"And I was there!" says Marlis Nichols, who started coming to the games with her husband Don around that time. "You should have seen it. The next night, fans from everywhere poured in. We rented this small banquet room. Those poor boys — that room was packed."

"It wasn't that small," corrects a voice from a nearby seat. Nancy Kerfoot turns around, her green IWU earrings swinging. "Nancy's originally from Roanoke," explains Sheldon. "She was our unofficial guide at nationals."

Kerfoot moved to Bloomington from Virginia in 1963, when her husband was transferred with State Farm Insurance Companies. She decided to attend an IWU game on the advice of a friend. “I love all sports,” she says. “I think my favorite program on TV is *The Best Damn Sports Show Ever*.” Kerfoot is like many on the bus, who have no direct affiliation with Illinois Wesleyan as alumni or parents but who just enjoy sports, and Titan basketball happened to fit the bill. “We tried going to Illinois State games,” comments Don Anderson, sitting with his wife Kay. “But the parking is so far away. This is just perfect. The driver drops you right off at the door.” The Andersons have been riding the fan bus for seven years. “It’s just more fun, too.”

For others on the bus, college athletics comes in only one color: Titan green. So dedicated are John W. Yoder ’49 and his wife Pat Hartman Yoder ’53 that they reverse the typical senior “snowbird” lifestyle, living in California in the warmer months and moving back to Illinois in time for the opening game. “Yes, we get some curious looks,” admits Pat. “Our friends ask us, ‘You come to Illinois for the winter?’ And I tell them we can’t miss IWU basketball season.” John nods. “Do not try to get her away from a game. She had two of our four children only after she came home from IWU basketball games.”

“Honestly, it doesn’t matter what IWU sport it is,” says Walt Moore ’52. “Basketball, football, soccer — we love it and we are there.”

A voice interrupts, broadcasting over the bus intercom. “I forgot to have everyone say hi to Frank, our driver,” Ruth Barnard tells the group. A chorus of “Hi, Frank,” echoes through the bus. “And he’s wearing his IWU basketball hat!” notes Barnard as the seats erupt with hoots and applause.

* * *

Gradually, a calm settled over the bus, interspersed with the quiet scratches of pencils on crossword puzzles and the rustle of popcorn bags. “Hey Ruth,” asked one passenger softly. “Where are we going to eat?” Barnard laughs and responds with her own question: “How many years have you been on this trip?” If the destination is far enough, the fan bus will stop for a bite, and if the bus is heading north, that means the Family Restaurant in Bolingbrook, where the group arrives at 5:30 p.m. The restaurant’s staff is expecting them, and a hostess leads them to a constellation of empty tables. Under bright fluorescent lights, pads of butter are spread over warm rolls, and friendly conversations flow.



Dudley Bridges (above), father of former coach Dennie Bridges, shares a laugh with fellow diners during a pit stop in Bolingbrook.

“I’ve been to games from the East Coast to the West Coast, and IWU has one of the best facilities in the Shirk Center I’ve ever seen.”

“Now Wheaton has a new complex.”

“Not as nice as Shirk.”

After dinner, fans re-board the bus and head back to their respective seats. There’s no assigned seating, but certain personalities flock to different areas. For example, the clowning increases the further back you sit. All the way in the rear resides the “comedians’ row.” “Believe nothing they say,” Barnard warns.

“My name is Bobaganoush,” says one back-seater, by way of introduction, cracking up his buddies. When asked if he was an IWU alumnus, another deadpans, “It took me two terms to get out of the third grade — Eisenhower and Nixon.”

Matt Adams chuckles with appreciation, but then goads the backseat comics into providing some more serious answers. He is respected among the entire group not just for his dedication to the team, but also for his consideration of other fans. “He always makes sure we have a ride home,” says Winn of Adams. “He watches out for us.”

Many of the away-bus fans carry distinctive roles, and even have mock-official titles to go with them. Mike Scholl is the “manager.” Bob and Joan Moews are the “general managers.” John A. Knox took the title of “tour director.”

Ken Anderson ’58, the unofficial captain, remarks, “I’ve been coming to Illinois Wesleyan games for 54 years. And I’ve finally graduated to the senior citizen bus.”

“You’ve heard of backseat drivers? I’m a backseat coach,” explains Ken Camp to a first-timer on the bus. He shouts up to Barnard, “They keep us back here to keep us in line, right Aunt Ruth?” She rolls her eyes in mock disdain and mutters, “No relation.”

“You stick with us,” Camp says with a conspiratorial wink. “We’ll show you a thing or two about the game.”

* * *

At 7:15 p.m., bus 255 rolls up to the front of Wheaton College’s King Arena. Though she barely passes five feet in height, Barnard is a formidable presence as she stands guard to divert traffic so passengers can safely cross the street.

“Ruth’s group,” as they are affectionately known by fellow fans, enters the gymnasium. The air is charged with anticipation. They find their way to their seats amid a vast horseshoe of green sweatshirts and hats that spill over the designated area for visitors, threatening to overpower the fans sporting Wheaton’s orange and blue. Everyone seems to know one another and the vibe is as much family reunion as away game.

For those who wish to applaud and cheer the game, the side seats will do nicely. But for those ready to really exercise their vocal cords, only the railing behind the net will suffice. The comedians make their way for this choice spot. “There is no cussing here,” instructs Camp. “You can hit, punch, and kick, but no cussing.”

Ken Anderson joins in the laughter, adding, “And it’s the perfect distance for spitting at the referees,” with a sly smile that lets you know he’s almost certainly kidding.

The mood gets serious as game time approaches. Stats and rankings are soberly compared as the Wheaton team takes the court. Then the Titans emerge and their fans erupt into a chorus of cheers that cause the Wheaton band to lower their instruments until the din subsides. “Welcome to the Shirk Center,” Scholl says under his breath.

Players past and present are grateful for the consistency of fan support over the years. “It’s unbelievable,” summed up senior guard and team captain Jim Lehan prior to the game. Lehan, who is the lone senior among IWU’s starters, added, “The fans have to be among the best in the country for a Division III school. It’s tough to get up for the games. When the fans are there, it’s easier to play with intensity.”



A match-up with conference rival Wheaton College brings Winford McElroy '54 and his wife Marilyn (right) to the edge of their seats.

“The bus even came for JV games when I was in school,” fondly recalls Korey Coon '00, a fan favorite who was part of the '97 championship team and was chosen Academic All-American of the Year in 1999. “The bus quickly became a symbol for the crowds that would meet the team. We’d walk in wearing our coats and ties and receive a standing ovation a half hour before the game.”

“There is an absolute loyalty of IWU fans,” says Bridges, who speaks from experience both as a former player and coach. “They are undeterred.”

Finally, the buzzer sounds and the ball flies into the air. At once, the railing fans jump to their feet. Old and young alike shout as a rivalry grows with the home team’s fans at the opposite railing. Soon, chants of “Defense! Defense!” at each net drown the sound of the ball hitting the court.

Each exchange of possession becomes a small battle, and the Titan fans predict every shot with calls of “no good,” or “it’s hot” as players release the ball toward their respective goals. Anxiety builds as Wheaton pulls out to an early lead. “This will not be an easy game,” says Scholl.

Wheaton closes the first half with an 11-2 surge. As the visitors fall behind, a few of their fans take out their frustration on the officiating, with one young supporter even making a colorful suggestion involving a referee’s whistle. “I told you that you would learn something here,” says Camp.

The Titans head into their locker room down 43-36. The fans turn to their rosters and praise stellar shots. “It used to be you had one or two teams that would dominate the conference,” observes Ken Anderson. “Now it’s tight all around.”

In the second half, the fans yell for a rally, but Wheaton holds its momentum. The final score leaves the deflated Titans more than 30 points down. Yet as the fans began to drift from the complex, Bridges’ observation about their unswerving loyalty rings true.

“Did you see Jimmy tonight? He was on.”

“Glad they got that out of their system. Now they’re ready for North Park on Wednesday.”

“Can’t overlook North Park now.”

“Not that they would have, anyway.”

As they board the bus for home, the driver sees the somber faces and asks gently, “Wheaton a tough team?”

Moore simply replies, “We’ll play them again.”

It’s a quiet ride home, though a comedy video slipped into the VCR helps lighten the mood a bit. At 11:30 p.m., bus 255 pulls into the Shirk Center parking lot. Barnard picks up her microphone. “Be careful, everyone. It’s awful dark out there.” The fans pull on their coats and clear the leftover popcorn bags off their seats.

“Now,” says Barnard, “you need to let me know by tomorrow if you’re heading to North Park. We’ll be heading off to face them!” The passengers roar their approval as they begin to depart, single file, down the steps. Adams looks on to make sure everyone gets safely to their cars. And the goodbye is repeated, “Good night, Ruth. See you Wednesday.”

Win or lose, these traveling fans won’t quit their team. They know from years of experience that, sooner or later, the green and white will come roaring back on the road, and the familiar sound of their boisterous cheers will once again raise their opponents’ rafters.



Titans celebrate the CCIW championship.

Editor's postscript: After the defeat to Wheaton College, the Titans did, in fact, come roaring back. They won 10 straight games and captured the conference championship with a 75-72 decision over — who else? — Wheaton at the Shirk Center. Qualifying for Division III tournament play, the Titans had won their first two games at presstime. For the latest results, go to www.iwu.edu/~iwunews/sports