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Courtside Chronicles

Dennie Bridges '61

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Courtside Chronicles

In an excerpt from his just-published memoirs, Coach Dennie Bridges gives a backstage glimpse into the drama behind one of Titan basketball's great victories.

Book Excerpt by Dennie Bridges '61, IWU Director of Athletics

(Introduction by Jeff Hanna, Vice President for Public Relations)

For as long as he could remember, Dennie Bridges wanted to write a book. A novel, actually. He had a plot in mind—about a post-nuclear holocaust Adam and Eve who spend their days rollicking in America's great sports venues—but could never quite get started.

Then, after 36 years of coaching Illinois Wesleyan basketball, Bridges stepped down following the 2000-01 season. He knew that his first season out of coaching would not be easy, that he was bound to suffer withdrawal symptoms. So he met one challenge with another. He decided to make good on his promise to himself and write that book. Except the book he wrote, *A Dunk Only Counts Two Points*, bears no resemblance to the plot he'd had in mind. It isn't a novel at all. Instead, it is a book of memories to be shared with generations of Illinois Wesleyan fans and players who lived the experiences with him.

The strategy worked. Rather than dwelling on how much he missed coaching, Bridges spent every free minute in front of his computer. Some days the memories flowed freely onto the screen; other days, he admits, "my hands didn't work." In the end, Bridges not only kept his sanity, but he also wrote his book.

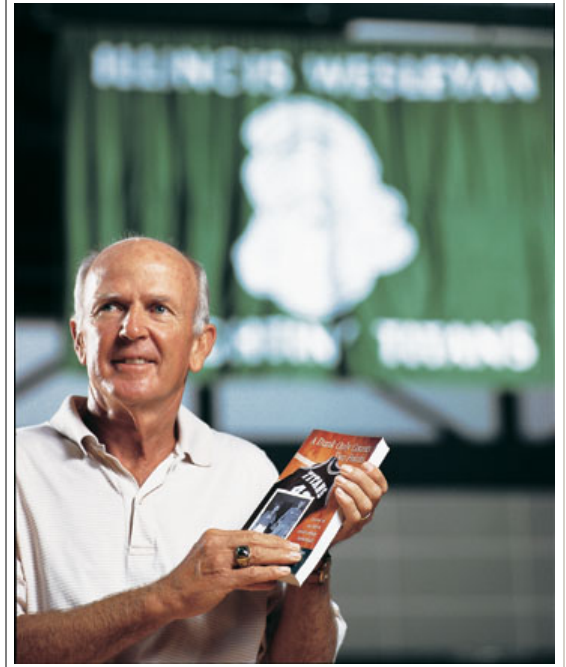
"I began without a clear plan. I just wrote about individual events in my life and my coaching career. I wrote about my experience recruiting Jack Sikma and then I wrote about Coach [Jack] Horenberger. When I'd finish writing, I'd throw the pages into a drawer where I thought they'd probably stay," Bridges says.

The drawer began filling up with pages. Four or five months after he started, when the drawer contained 16 stories, Bridges allowed himself to think of them as chapters in a potential book. His first thought was to organize them chronologically. But he wasn't sure that would be the best way. So he sought some advice from his former Illinois Wesleyan baseball teammate, *Sporting News* columnist David Kindred '63.

"David rearranged the chapters and then told me that I needed to work on making the transitions," says Bridges. "Initially, I balked at this since it meant more writing, but David told me that's what writing is—rewriting. When I went to work on that, I added some additional chapters."

The end result is a book that Bridges hopes will accomplish two goals. On the one hand, he wants to offer his own memories of the seasons past. Secondly, he would like young coaches to get a sense of his idea of the proper role of athletics.

Bridges makes it plain that coaching a small-college basketball team is altogether different from the big-money, high-pressure Division I programs. From road trips by car to recruiting players based on ACT scores as much as points per game, the scenes he describes will resonate with anyone who has been affiliated with the non-scholarship, play-for-the-fun-of-it version of the game.



Page Turner: Basketball coach turned author Dennie Bridges (above) wanted to share his memories with loyal Titan fans. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

And yet—as the following edited excerpt from *A Dunk Only Counts Two Points* demonstrates—playing for fun and playing to win are not mutually exclusive. Bridges could (and does) pinpoint numerous career highlights in his book, but Illinois Wesleyan fans, young or old, will not forget that February evening in 1997 when the Titans won the NCAA national title against Division III rival Nebraska Wesleyan:

* * *

After 32 years of college coaching, I was going to bed knowing that the next day my team would be playing one game for the national championship. My assistant coach, David Steinbrueck, and I tried to watch a couple of tapes of Nebraska Wesleyan, but with only about 16 hours until game time there was very little time to prepare. We would have an on-the-court walk-through at 10 a.m., with the championship game scheduled for 6 that evening.

At our walk-through, we tried to prepare the team for Nebraska Wesleyan's offensive pattern. In the Williams game they seemed so comfortable and confident in their execution. They set really good screens for their three-point shooting guards, and they had an outstanding University of Nebraska transfer forward named Chad Ideus who shot a high-arching three-point shot from the baseline. I really felt that about all we accomplished at the walk-through was getting the team up and moving and stretching out the soreness from the Alvernia game.

I was too nervous to eat any lunch. I guess you might think we would spend the remaining hours watching tapes and poring over scouting reports, leaving no stone unturned in preparing for the national championship game. Instead, my wife Rita, my daughter Angie, and I went for a long walk through some pastureland near our hotel. Angie had flown in from Denver for the game, and my sons, Steve and Eric, had flown down from Chicago. The boys were taking advantage of the mild Virginia weather to play golf.

As we rode from the hotel to the arena, I was still sorting out in my mind possible game strategies. Nebraska Wesleyan had shot so well from long range against Williams that using a zone defense seemed almost not to be an option. In my mind, though, I couldn't shake how comfortably and efficiently they had executed their man-to-man attack.

I was also concerned with our inside players fouling out as they tried to compete on the boards with Nebraska Wesleyan's size. With [center Andy] Boyden out [with mononucleosis], we had five fewer fouls to give and about 30 extra minutes of playing time for Matt Hoder and John Baines to share. Matt's eye was swollen and ugly looking, but he could play. The national championship game would be only the second starting assignment of his career.

In our locker room before the game, I made a last-minute decision to start in a 3-2 zone. In the last two seasons we had had some success using this zone. I really didn't give my team a strong message of commitment to the zone. I told them that we would start in "Black," our name designation for the zone, and stay in it until Nebraska Wesleyan scored a field goal.

The start of the championship game was just the opposite of the semi-final game with Alvernia. Nebraska Wesleyan had no offensive rhythm against our zone and missed its first five shots. At the same time we were scoring on the break and getting good shots in our offense. When Nebraska Wesleyan did hit its first shot, I told my team to stay with the zone and see how far we could ride it. We led by as many as 23 points in the first half. Ideus hit a long three from the corner in the last minute to cut our lead to 19 at halftime.

Can you imagine my feelings walking to the locker room at halftime of the national championship game with a 19-point lead? I know that I was happy, excited and scared to death! We were 20 minutes away from a dream, or 20 minutes away from the nightmare of losing a big halftime lead and the championship. I spent the halftime trying to calm everybody down and plug some holes that were developing in the zone.

My coaching style of using a short rotation of eight players was a concern. With Boyden not playing, the rotation was down to seven players and the pressure and fatigue of two huge games in less than 24 hours might be a telling factor. At least we were not in foul trouble at halftime.

It is difficult to keep from playing cautiously and trying to sit on a lead, so we talked about continuing to push the ball.

Nebraska Wesleyan started the second half shooting much better over our zone, but was not getting any defensive stops. We maintained our lead until about the 11:00 minute mark. Then bad things started to happen.

As Hoder was driving to the hoop, he twisted a foot and went down in pain. He was fouled on the play and made one of two free throws but he could not return, and it was later determined his foot was broken. The five front line players that we had been playing all year—[Bryan] Crabtree, [Brent] Niebrugge, Hoder, Boyden, and Baines—were now down to three, and Niebrugge soon picked up his fourth foul.

Our first adjustment was to go to three guards and take Niebrugge out to protect against his fifth foul.

While we were having our problems, Nebraska Wesleyan was filling the hoop up with three-point shots, and momentum had swung dramatically in their favor. Our lead had shrunk to less than 10 points. We called time-out and I decided that we had to get out of the zone.

Nebraska Wesleyan moved smoothly into their man-to-man offense and, with six minutes to go, our 19-point halftime lead was almost gone. We led by one point when Niebrugge came back into the game. At the postgame celebration, Crabtree told our fans that at that point, as the team walked back onto the floor following a time-out, he and Brent looked at each other and he said to Brent, “We’ve got to get every rebound.” And, Bryan said, “Brent did!”

We missed a shot and they knocked the ball out of bounds under our hoop. We called time-out and set up an out-of-bounds play with Niebrugge in the center’s spot. He had not filled that role on this play all year. Crabtree screened down on his man and we gave Brent a high pass for a score that put us back up by three. At that same time-out, we went back to our zone in hopes that it would take Nebraska Wesleyan a couple of possessions to adjust. The time-out was momentum turning and stopped the bleeding for us.

The game was far from over. On the next possession, John Baines fouled out. We were now down to Bryan and Brent as players considered in the frontline playing mix. I needed an inside defender, so I called on Matt Mann, a six-foot-seven-inch junior from Bourbonnais, Ill., who had never been called on to play a really meaningful varsity minute in his career. He had been extremely valuable to us as a big and agile player to go against in practice.

I have often wondered about the emotions that Matt experienced when he heard me call his name. He was going into the national championship game with us holding a three-point lead.

Our lead bounced back and forth between three and one. With us leading by one, they passed the ball inside to the player that Matt was defending. Matt held his ground and moved his feet, and both he and the player he was defending went down. Traveling was the call! His big defensive play got us the ball back.

Finally, with us leading by three with about two minutes to play, Nebraska Wesleyan missed a long three-point shot from the corner. We rebounded and got the ball into Korey Coon’s hands on the break. He found Nathan Hubbard wide open on the wing for a three-point shot. He made it! We now had a six-point lead. We made our free throws down the stretch and withstood a couple more Nebraska Wesleyan three-pointers, including one at the buzzer, to win 89-86.

What a magnificent feeling! We finally ended the season with the ultimate prize! There were hugs and tears and relief and laughter and love for the players and for our devoted fans. Our young players had said exactly one year earlier, "We're going to go back to Salem and win the whole thing." And we did!

The Titans had finished the season with a 29-2, record, which was a school record for wins in a season, and the .935 winning percentage was bettered only by the Coach Horenberger-captained 1935-36 team that was 20-0.

Our players lined up in front of our huge crowd and applauded them. Our following was loyal and we wanted them to know that they had earned a part of this championship. The party later at the hotel went on almost all night—a truly amazing connection between our players and fans.

Fox Sports telecast the game via satellite, and it was seen in many locations in the U.S. They did an extraordinary job and treated us great. They focused a lot on Nebraska Wesleyan's second-half comeback and the 13 three-point baskets the Plainsmen scored in that half. Coach Todd Raridon and his team never gave up but just couldn't ever get all the way back. One of their assistant coaches said to me about a year later, "That damned zone defense."

The game story that Fox Sports missed was the dramatic depletion of players that we overcame as we fought to get to the wire. Boyden couldn't play, Hoder was lost to injury, Baines fouled out, Coon played 39 minutes, Hubbard played 37 minutes, Crabtree played 36 minutes, and Niebrugge played 34 minutes. We hung in and refused to lose.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, as I was trying to get a couple of hours sleep, I wished that I had thought to put Boyden in the game with three seconds to go and us up by six. Then I wondered if his name was in the scorebook. If it had not been in, we would have gotten a technical foul. His play in helping us get to the Final Four was really important, and if I had been thinking more clearly I could have given him a floor appearance.

The championship team owed a lot to the previous year's third-place team. That experience was crucial in helping us get to the top. Both of these teams were products of great team chemistry. Many of the key players paid their dues as JV players while waiting for their turn to get in the mix.

It was great for me to have my wife and kids and parents in Salem for the championship. They deserve lots of thanks for sacrifices they made as I tried to become a successful coach.

Finally, Coach Horenberger was not at the game. He and [wife] Mary Ann were in Florida. True to form, he could not watch or listen to the game. He was out walking around the block, getting an update every time he passed the condo. The halftime score was good news. On the pass where the lead was down to one point, he told me he stepped up the pace.

He was the first person I phoned when I returned to the hotel.

To order Dennie Bridges' book, send a check or money order to *A Dunk Only Counts Two Points*, c/o Dennie Bridges, Shirk Center, 302 East Emerson, Bloomington, IL 61701. The cost is \$15 per copy, plus \$2 for shipping and handling. Credit card orders may be placed by calling (309) 556-3196. Copies of the book will be available for purchase during Homecoming 2002. If you would like to have the book personally autographed by the author, please include details with your order.