



Summer 2002

Staying Power

James W. Bennett '64
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

Recommended Citation

Bennett '64, James W. (2002) "Staying Power," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol11/iss2/5>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

Staying Power

by James W. Bennett '64

"The Lord don't want me and the Devil won't have me so I'm kind of in limbo." Ask Jerome Robert Van Meter the secret to centenarianship, and that's the answer you'll get. He goes on to add, "I'm not sure there is any secret; just hanging in there, I guess."

Van Meter, who graduated from IWU in 1922, will turn 102 this August, making him the university's oldest alumnus. He currently resides in an assisted-living facility in Beckley, W. Va., where his earlier coaching prowess earned him honors almost too numerous to mention. In a recent poll of sportswriters and coaches, he was named one of the 10 best West Virginia high school coaches in the 20th century. Those voting established several criteria, one of which was, "You had to be wildly successful in coaching at least two sports."

He is also in West Virginia's Athletic Hall of Fame. But his acclaim doesn't stop with the Mountain State; in July of 1997, a month prior to his 97th birthday, he was inducted into the National High School Hall of Fame. "They tell me I've got a plaque hanging in the National Hall of Fame up in Springfield, Massachusetts," he reports, "but I've never been there to see it."



At 101, Hall of Fame Coach Jerome Van Meter '22 shares some lessons on the meaning of success, in sports and in life.

Van Meter was born in 1900 and grew up in Williamsville, Ill. "I was a Cubs fan," he's quick to mention. "When I was a kid, my friends and I would find ways to go to some of their games. We went on passenger trains a good deal of the time, but we'd ride up on freight trains if we had to. This was before Wrigley Field was built, when the team was still playing on the West Side Grounds."

He is thus one of the few living Cub fans—or Americans, for that matter—who can remember the last time the team won a World Series (1908) and also Sammy Sosa's continuing assault on power-hitting records in the early part of the 21st century.

At age 18, in 1918, Van Meter served in the military as an infantry man in "The War to End all Wars," a.k.a. World War I. But as the war was winding down, he was able to enroll at IWU in the fall of that year. In his four years on campus, he majored in math and science while finding plenty of time to compete as a multi-sport athlete for the Titans. He played football, basketball, and baseball.

IWU's 1922 yearbook boasted that "Wesleyan's prospects for a successful season this year are especially bright. This year's captain, Jerome Van Meter, a veteran from last year's team, is the

proper man to lead the team to victory this year. 'Van' is one of the steady 'get-results' kind of player. There isn't anything flashy about his playing but he has a habit of putting at least one over the fence in every game."

Jerome's older brother LaRue was a versatile Titan athlete as well. He, too, graduated in 1922 and enjoyed a successful high school coaching career, mostly in Southern Illinois. "When I graduated," says Jerome, "I looked out of state for coaching and teaching opportunities. I didn't want to be competing with LaRue for recognition—we'd been doing that most of our lives. Besides, math and science majors who could coach were in demand most everywhere. I had a lot of choices and options. I picked Point Pleasant, West Virginia, almost out of a hat. I'd had no previous exposure to West Virginia but it just seemed like a right fit somehow."

After teaching and coaching for six years at Point Pleasant, Van Meter took a similar job at Beckley's Woodrow Wilson High School. "They offered more money," he says, "and we certainly needed it." The we, in this case, included his wife Aline, who eventually became his marriage partner of more than 70 years.

It was at Woodrow Wilson that he became the legendary coach known as "The Gray Eagle." He coached the Flying Eagles in football and basketball for all or parts of four decades. His teams enjoyed stunning success. From 1930 through 1959, his Beckley-based basketball teams won 501 games while losing 159. During the '30s, his teams were consistently winning and challenging for various championships. But it was after that other "war to end all wars" (WW II), which put his coaching career on hold, that Van Meter moved his Woodrow Wilson teams into even higher gear.

"I spent '42, '43, and '44 in the military, training troops. I trained troops in Alabama, Long Island, New York City, and New Jersey. I was anxious to get back into coaching at Woodrow Wilson just as soon as the war ended."

Upon his return to Beckley, he led the Flying Eagles to state basketball championships in 1946, 1951-54, and 1957. Years earlier, in 1940, they finished as state runners-up with a record of 25-3. Part of the reason for so much bounty was Van Meter's modern approach to the game; he was ahead of his time. "I wanted players with lots of speed," he says. "Quick, quick, and quicker. I tried to change the nature of the game by changing its tempo. We liked to press all over the court and run fast breaks whenever possible. It was a strategy which really caught some of our opponents off-guard."

His football teams were no less dominant. He compiled a record of 155-55-12. Woodrow Wilson captured state titles in 1947, 1948, and 1951. All three teams were undefeated. His final three teams (he stopped coaching football after the 1954 season) all finished with 9-1 records.

"I always insisted on discipline," Van Meter explains. "If you didn't have discipline you couldn't play for me. The greatest athlete in the world is not necessarily going to be beneficial to your team if he can't follow coaching directions and work as part of a team." Scores of his athletes went on to enjoy college athletic success. One of them, Bob Pruett, is the current head football coach at Marshall University.

Many of his former players recall his leadership qualities and his compassion as well as his vision with the X's and O's. One of them, Beckley resident Robert Young, says, "I always get the chills when talking about this man, because I have always looked on him as a dad, coach, and friend....He is one of the greatest coaches I have known and is a legend in West Virginia and throughout the country."

Young and many other former players and friends were there to rally around the coach when he returned to Beckley a few years ago—a move prompted by wife Aline's progressing Alzheimer's condition. "We'd been living down in Leesburg, Florida, for about 17 years when Aline's condition deteriorated to the point where I couldn't really take care of her," he explains. "I decided to return to Beckley, where everybody knew us and we had a network of friends to help us out."

Aline died two years ago. "She recognized me, knew who I was, right up to the end of her life. She would squeeze my hand and look me in the eye. She knew who I was." The secret to a 74-year marriage? "You have to like each other," Van Meter says. "It's not hard to fall in love, but you have to like each other to flourish together over the long haul."

Van Meter and Aline liked each other from coast to coast and border to border. "We used to travel every summer in an old Holiday Rambler. Eventually we bought a trailer. We visited every state in the union, and that includes Alaska and Hawaii."

Many of these summer sojourns included stop-offs at coaching clinics. "I went to different coaching clinics over the years," Van Meter recalls. Several of them were at the University of Illinois, where he collaborated with the legendary Bob Zuppke, and Notre Dame, where he worked with another football icon, Knute Rockne. "Rockne and I got to know each other pretty well over time; he used to call me 'West Virginia.' Zuppke was a fine man and an excellent coach, but he was a little more reserved, not as easy to get close to."

All the while, Van Meter hasn't forgotten his connection to Illinois Wesleyan that began more than eight decades ago. Although his last campus visit was in 1988, he maintains contact with IWU administrators and coaches, and a scrapbook of Van Meter memorabilia maintained by friends is filled with photos from his Illinois Wesleyan days.

On the eve of his 102 birthday, Jerome Van Meter views his long and fruitful life with gratitude and humility. "It was a great life for me to start coaching at [age] 22 and still be teaching till 1972." Buoyed by a strong spirit and blessed with the support of his many fans and friends, the "Gray Eagle" soars on. Who knows?—he may yet see his good ol' Cubs win another World Series.