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The Titan Spirit

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The Titan Spirit Personified

Honored for the half a century he dedicated to his alma mater, Dennie Bridges '61 showed why he's beloved by generations of fans and players.



During the ceremony, Bridges paid an emotional tribute to his wife, Rita, and their children and grandchildren.

Dennie Bridges '61 made sure he had a water bottle in hand as he stood in the middle of the Shirk Center court that had just been officially named in his honor.

Known to get choked up when honoring his players at Senior Nights, Bridges knew he might have trouble getting through his remarks before a packed gymnasium of fans, former players and family — including his wife, Rita; children (and former Titan athletes) Angela Romani '85, Steve '86 and Eric '87, and three grandchildren.

“They don't name floors after great wives, wonderful mothers, wonderful grandmothers,” said Bridges, wrapping his arm around his wife. After pausing to collect himself, he added, “If they did, they'd name them for Rita.”

Many of Bridges' former players traveled back to Central Illinois to attend the dedication of the Dennie Bridges Court during a Feb. 21 halftime ceremony at the Titans' final regular season game. With those players, Bridges compiled a 667-319 record during his years as head basketball coach from 1965 to 2001 — a total that still ranks No. 5 among all Division III coaches and No. 38 regardless of division.

Bridges' teams reached the Division III tournament 14 times in 18 years of association with the NCAA, finishing third twice and winning the national championship in 1997. His teams also won 17 College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin championships.

“It's especially happy for me to have all these players here,” said Bridges at the halftime ceremony. “When they announced 17 championships, there they are,” pointing to the Titan alumni who were circled together around the newly named court. His voice cracked, and he paused to take another sip of water.

“I always wanted to get off the bus with the best players, and I got off the bus with all of these guys. Actually sometimes it wasn't a bus,” Bridges said. “Sometimes it was a van, and I was the driver.”

While Bridges left coaching in 2001, he continued as Illinois Wesleyan's athletic director, a position he's held since 1981. If the decision to retire on July 31 had been based on no longer wanting to do the job, “I never would have retired,” said Bridges, “because I enjoy what I do. I enjoy being around the coaches and student-athletes.”

“Retirement age is traditionally 65, and I’m a bit past that,” said Bridges, who turned 76 this February. “I decided a couple of years ago that in 2014 I would have completed 50 years here and that might be a good time. I delayed a year to be closely involved in getting the Shirk Center expansion project going, so it will turn out to be 51 years.”

Since his retirement was announced in January, the accolades have poured in — first from University President Richard F. Wilson, who said, “Dennie Bridges has provided extraordinary leadership and service to Illinois Wesleyan over a long career, first as men’s basketball coach and then as athletic director.”

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Wilson added, “Dennie and I have worked together for the past decade, and I could not have been better served by an athletic director. His dedication and commitment as a coach, teacher and administrator have served as a model for many athletes and friends across the country, in this community and at this University.”

“Dick Wilson is retiring the same day I’m retiring.” Bridges noted. “He’s been a wonderful president to work with. We’ve gotten along as good as a president and an AD can get along, and he’s going to be really hard to replace.”

Over the past months, Bridges’ mailbox was regularly stuffed with notes of best wishes and gratitude from former players. He’s also heard from many of “the Titan faithful,” as he calls them — fans who boarded buses for away games and who crowded into Memorial Gym (where he played as an athlete), Fred Young Fieldhouse (where his teams won 285 games) and the Shirk Center, where Bridges’ squads won 93 of 98 home games over the course of seven years.

At the dedication ceremony, Bridges addressed those fans “who’ve been so good to me and the Titans over the years. It’s been so great to be at Illinois Wesleyan for over half a century; thank you!”



Former players traveled from across the country to attend a halftime ceremony dedicating the Shirk Center performance arena as the Dennie Bridges Court.

Skilled, smart, unselfish

In his Jan. 21 column, *Pantagraph* sportswriter Randy Kindred noted: “Others embrace their alma mater. Bridges embodied his long ago.”

Bridges’ bond with his alma mater became close from the moment he arrived at IWU as a college student. A native of Anchor, Ill., a rural town east of Bloomington, Bridges had played three sports in high school and decided to try the same feat at IWU. When he graduated in 1961, he was a four-year letterman and starter in basketball and baseball and a three-year football letterman, where he was an all-conference quarterback.

In basketball he was coached by another Titan legend, Jack Horenberger, who became Bridges’ mentor and close friend.

After coaching at Plainfield (Ill.) High School, he returned to IWU in 1964 as basketball and football assistant and head tennis coach. Named head basketball coach for the 1965-66 season and with four starters back from a championship team, the rookie coach led the Titans to a sixth conference title in seven years.

Throughout his career as a player and a coach, Bridges looked to guidance from Horenberger, who continued to serve as Illinois Wesleyan’s athletic director after Bridges became head basketball coach.

“Coach Horenberger and I have been in charge of athletics at Illinois Wesleyan for 70 years,” said Bridges, who described the late Horenberger (himself a Titan athlete and a 1936 IWU graduate) as “a wonderful man. I still make decisions based on what Coach Horenberger would do. Things have changed dramatically, but basic values are the same.



Bridges, right, reviews film with Titan coaches Larson and Keck.

“I reflect on the days of Coach Horenberger, Don Larson, Bob Keck and myself pretty much doing it all — coaching multiple sports, teaching the classes, taping the ankles, doing the laundry, driving the teams to games and caring for the fields, while Barb Cothren was doing it all for women’s athletics.”

Ron Rose ’88, who just finished his ninth season as IWU’s head basketball coach, was himself a letter-winning starting guard for Bridges’ teams and describes his former coach’s influence much the same way that Bridges describes Horenberger’s.

“The type of player he recruited, we modeled as far as a skilled, smart, unselfish player,” Rose told the *Pantagraph*.

“The basketball program is part of his legacy. The fact he had confidence in me to carry that on means a great deal to me,” said Rose, who continues traditions such as not meeting with his team immediately after games. “I’ve said it many times. I’m just carrying the baton right now. This is Coach Bridges’ program.”

Much as he successfully recruited athletes as a coach, Bridges used his role as athletic director to find coaches who were an ideal match for IWU's competitive but academically focused environment.

“As an accomplishment, I see my treatment of all sports in a championship manner, with a special emphasis on raising the level of women's athletics,” Bridges says. “And the results of this special emphasis are evident as Illinois Wesleyan University is a national player in many sports, with the women's teams right with the men's teams.”

In his *Pantagraph* column, Kindred wrote: “Even before Bridges stepped down as basketball coach in 2001, he was a fan of any athlete in Illinois Wesleyan green and white. That only intensified when he stopped coaching. That was clear in the four years my daughter [Kayla '08] played softball for IWU. ... On nearly every home date in that span, Bridges was there for at least part of the game(s).”

After coaching his basketball team to the Division III national title in 1997, Bridges has seen IWU teams win national championships in women's indoor track (2008), women's outdoor track (2008 and 2010), baseball (2010) and women's basketball (2012).

Part of that success is a credit to the outstanding athletic facilities built under Bridges' guidance. “With significant help from the Shirk family and the Shirk Foundation, Dennie has created one of the finest athletic complexes in Division III,” said Wilson. “He has managed these facilities in a way that benefits not only our students and student-athletes but also the community. The philosophy that guides the operation of the Shirk Center and Athletic Complex is unique in higher education.”

Says Bridges, “I'm proud that I wrote the planning document for the Shirk Center and was involved in planning for the Horenberger baseball field and all of our outdoor venues. I'm also proud that, from the start, we've shared our facilities with the community.”

On having the Shirk Center court named in his honor, Bridges said, “I relate it to how good Coach Horenberger felt about Jack Horenberger Field. I know he was really overwhelmed with the idea that he would have his name on something at Illinois Wesleyan forever.”

“He absolutely deserves to have his name on the court,” said Rose. “It will be my job to make sure future Titans understand what an honor it is to play on that court.” — *Tim Obermiller and Stew Salowitz '76*



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