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## Titan basketball's greatest player pays tribute to former coach

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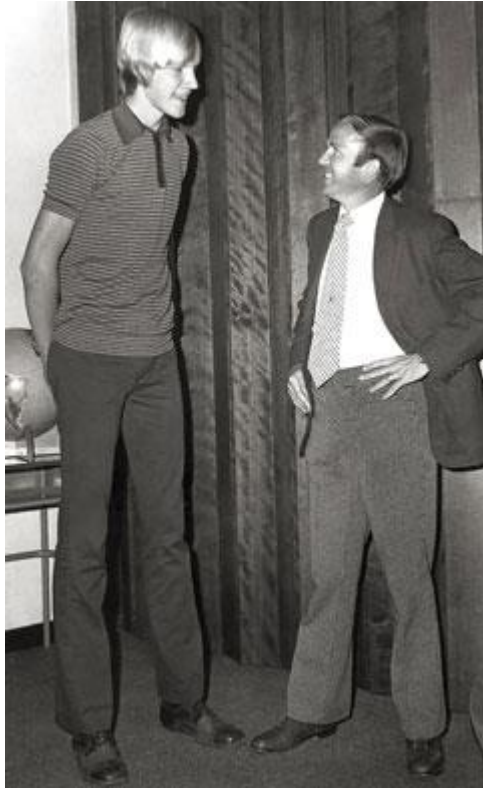
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## Titan basketball's greatest player pays tribute to former coach



**St. Anne High School's towering center Jack Sikma poses with his future coach the day he announced he would be attending Illinois Wesleyan.**

Dennie Bridges' former players have gone on to prestigious careers in medicine, business and the arts. But in the field of athletics, perhaps none stand taller than 6-foot-11 Jack Sikma '77. An All-Star center who led the Seattle SuperSonics to an NBA title in 1979, Sikma spent 14 seasons in the NBA with Seattle and the Milwaukee Bucks, retiring after the 1991 season.

Sikma, who majored in accounting at IWU, was among dozens of former players who attended ceremonies in February dedicating Dennie Bridges Court in the Shirk Center. He took time out to talk about the man he first met as a senior playing basketball for St. Anne High School in Kankakee County, Ill., and who he still refers to simply as "Coach."

### **What makes Coach Bridges unique?**

There's a number of things. Number one, Coach Bridges is very competitive, and we had good practices, we were prepared. You have to do the work. I remember when he was recruiting me, he'd finish

practice, and he'd hop in his car — I lived a couple hours away — but that was part of the job, and he needed to get players here, so he was willing to do it. So, "Do the work" is something that he instilled in me.

The other part was that it's okay to be sensitive in the sense of if you see someone struggling, he was right there to reach out right away. He wanted to get to the bottom of it, help you through situations, and he had that sense where he could tell if things were not going great and he would deal with it right at that point.

From a workplace situation where you're working with others, or as a parent, to just make sure you had your finger on the pulse of what's going on with people that are important and dear to you — Coach always showed that empathy, which I think is unique, particularly in the coaching line of work, because it can be tough, and you'll see more harshness elsewhere. You didn't see that with Coach Bridges.

**You were highly recruited by some of the biggest college basketball programs as a high school senior. Why did you pick Illinois Wesleyan?**

Coach is the reason I went here. He was relentless in the recruiting pursuit and kept after me. There were times where I didn't think this was going to be the spot for me but in the end it was, and he's had a huge impact on my life.

Another important reason I picked Wesleyan was that I knew I was going to get a good education. I wanted to go into business and found my way into accounting, and I knew their business program was fantastic. And I think foremost — you see it with Coach Bridges in basketball, but throughout the University — I knew there was support here. People want to see you succeed. I had great professors, and I just really enjoyed going to class, and I felt like I got a very good education here.

Another factor in my decision was that the CCIW is a great Division III conference, so it's very competitive. It's a route that, as I moved on in my career — not many basketball players came this route — but it was unique for me, and I never looked back. It was the best spot for me.

**And Coach Bridges surrounded you with some great teams, and you're still friends with those guys.**

Yeah, actually this opportunity with Coach's retirement gave me a chance to reach out to many of my old teammates, some I've stayed in close contact with, some I would say we both would consider ourselves good friends, but we just haven't talked to each other for a while — life gets busy and that type of thing. So, it was great to reconnect with them. Again, my college experience and the number of friends I had; my teammates in the NBA in Seattle would just shake their head any time we went to Chicago to play because there was just this mass of Wesleyan alums and friends that would come. It was an event. I love playing basketball, I love the competition of the NBA, but those trips were really special because I knew after the game I was going to get a chance to have some fun and catch up with the Wesleyan crowd.



**Sikma #44 squares up for a jump shot against Henderson State at Kansas City in 1977.**



**Sikma took in a Titan women's basketball game during his recent campus visit.**

### **You don't get a chance to come back to campus too often, so what did you see on this trip?**

Believe it or not, this is the first game I'll watch in the Shirk Center. I came back when they retired my number, and that was still in the old Fred Young, which I'm glad it was because that's where I cut my teeth playing basketball here, and it was a special place. But I'm really looking forward to watching both the men's and women's teams play here in the Shirk Center atmosphere.

It's amazing how many people — it's not just the Illinois Wesleyan athletes but it's used all the time by the community, so there are tons of people that have had Shirk experiences. I was asking a friend walking in. "Well, so and so," a buddy of ours, "Where's he staying? Where is he sitting?" Because everybody has kind of got their spots in the game. So, if you're a regular here, you know where your people are going to be.

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