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"Get Bridges."

Dave Kindred '63

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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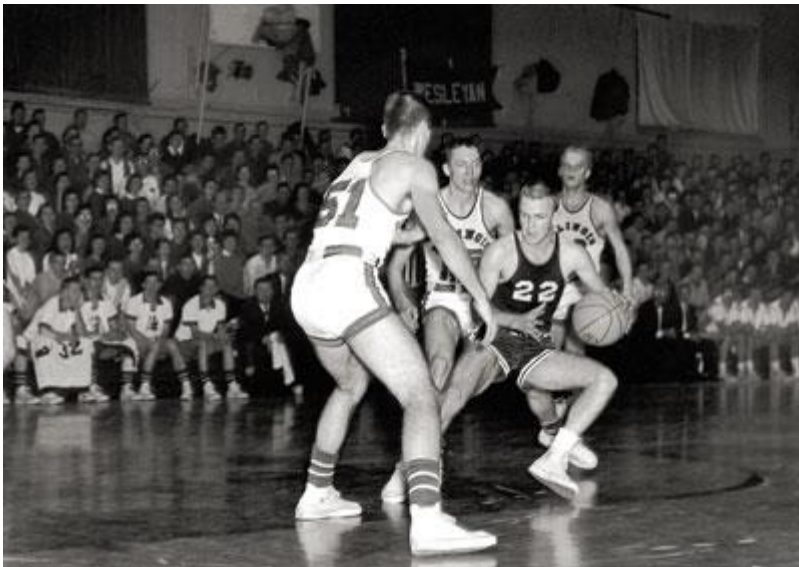
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“Get Bridges.”

With this simple notation began the career of a Titan legend.

Story by DAVE KINDRED '63

Editor's note: Dennie Bridges is celebrated for his career as coach and athletics director, but he was also a prodigious athlete, juggling his academics with three varsity sports as a Titan. Award-winning sportswriter Dave Kindred '63 explains how his former college teammate “epitomized Illinois Wesleyan athletics.”



Bridges shows intensity in a contest against Illinois State Normal University.

One night early in 1957, Jack Horenberger, the Illinois Wesleyan basketball coach, sent two of his players a half-hour northeast to watch Octavia High School play a basketball game. The players — Dean Padgett '58 and Dennis Mattix '59 — were asked to size up a prospect, which they did. More important was an addition to their report: “Get Bridges.”

Those two words, even 58 years later, are on the short list of best pieces of advice ever given Illinois Wesleyan.

Dennie Bridges could play any game you wanted to win. For some of us Titans, whatever age he is now, and I'll settle for Bob

Dylan's song, “Forever Young,” as the soundtrack of his life, Bridges will always be the small, strong, quick shortstop, quarterback, and point guard (before “point guards” were invented) who epitomized Illinois Wesleyan athletics.

He was 5-foot-9 and 160 pounds. He played in 215 Illinois Wesleyan games: 95 in baseball, 27 in football, and 93 in basketball. He was all-conference in football his senior year, most valuable player and leading scorer in basketball his junior year and basketball captain and baseball co-captain his senior year.

Around the College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin, where fans saw Bridges four and five times a year, he was thought to be that little, cocky irritant who just kept showing up to win games. His high school coach, Loren Laub, defended Bridges, if this be a defense: “People think Dennie is cocky. He isn't. He just has a world of confidence.”

I'm guessing that any Central Illinois kid who thought of himself as an athlete in the late 1950s paid full attention to Dennie Bridges at Illinois Wesleyan. I did. For Bridges' last two years at shortstop, I was his second baseman. Box scores show my claim to Illinois Wesleyan baseball glory: "DP: Bridges to Kindred to Hahn." Also, in 1997, when Coach Bridges' basketball team won the NCAA Division III national championship, I wrote my favorite story of Bridges the athlete — quoting our mutual hero, Coach Horenberger.

"I knew Dennie would succeed me one night when we were six down," Horenberger said. "I called a timeout but before I could say a word, Dennie said, 'Here's what we're going to do.' This, this, and

that. And he went out and made sure everybody did it. He dribbled behind his back, got a layup and the sucker free throws. And he did it three times. We were up by two."

His basketball-playing career was highlighted by a trip to the 32-team NAIA national tournament in Kansas City. "Coach said it wasn't enough to just get there, he wanted to win a game," Bridges said. In March 1961, the Titans defeated Gustavus Adolphus in the first round, 79-63, with Bridges scoring 14. They then lost to Central Oklahoma State.

Bridges's most memorable football day came in a 7-6 victory over Illinois State in 1960, the Titans' first victory over the cross-town rival in nine years. On the game-deciding drive of 50 yards, Bridges ran quarterback sweeps for 39 yards. He carried on eight of 13 plays, once converting on third-and-8 and later on fourth-and-3 from the 8-yard line. Titan coach Don Larson said, "Bridges? He's the greatest little guy in the world."

"I was best in basketball," Bridges said, "and I liked it best because we played a lot of games. I loved football because every game was an event. I liked baseball because every spring we made a Southern trip, playing at places like Ole Miss and Tulane."

He recalled sending home penny postcards from our trips. From Mississippi he told his parents of the great baseball field there. "Dugouts and fences," he wrote. Another card reported a speeding ticket given to a car in our caravan. "The fine was \$13.55."



The Illinois Wesleyan baseball team on their 1958 spring trip. Bridges is circled; to the right are teammates Ralph Sackett '60 and Dave Kindred.



Known by the University community as “Mr. Illinois Wesleyan,” Jack Horenberger ’36 was Bridges’ coach, mentor and friend.

“Yes, I do, Coach,” Bridges said.

That answer was born of the belief that he needed to earn his spot on every team. “I was afraid if I didn’t show up,” he said, “somebody would get my job.”

In 1957 Horenberger gave Bridges a half-scholarship ride, \$250 of the school’s \$490 tuition. Bridges said that each year, as tuition rose \$100, the coach bumped him up that hundred. While I cannot say precisely what Illinois Wesleyan’s return on the Bridges investment has been, it is approximately eighty-umpteenth kajillion on the dollar.

Those 215 games that began the Bridges Era cost Illinois Wesleyan \$1,600 in scholarship money. That comes to \$7.44 a game.

Dave Kindred ’63 was Illinois Wesleyan’s co-Alumnus of the Year in 1998. He is a member of the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association Hall of Fame.

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The three-sport thing happened because Bridges had done it at Octavia, and Horenberger asked him to try it at the college level.

“The deal was I’d try all three and decide my sophomore year what to do next,” he said. Naturally, he decided he couldn’t NOT play something. When football ended, he walked up the hill to Memorial Gym. When spring came, he put on long pants again for baseball. Because that schedule was his high school routine as well, Bridges said, “It wasn’t that big a deal.”

He made it a big deal by being a star in each sport. He earned 11 letters in his four seasons, missing the 12th when a sprained ankle kept him out of the ’58 football season. Once, appearing the next day for basketball practice after a bruising season-ending football game, Bridges heard Horenberger say, “Schoolboy, you don’t have to be here today.”