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Illinois Basketball Hall of Fame to Induct IWU Alum

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—“I thought you stopped playing 30 years ago,” Bob Hildebrand’s 95-year-old mother deadpanned, when she heard her son—an Illinois Wesleyan University basketball standout from the 1950s—was headed to the Illinois Basketball Hall of Fame.

Hildebrand will be inducted, April 24, into the Hall of Fame for his exploits as a player at Hartsburg-Emden High School in Hartsburg, Ill., where he played forward for a school with just 140 students. At age 14, he also coached the team . . . but more on that later.

Hildebrand will join the Hall of Fame in a ceremony at Illinois State University’s Bone Student Center. Nineteen other former players, eight members of the news media, 14 coaches, and 13 officials also will be inducted.

“This award,” Hildebrand said, “is really dedicated to the people of Hartsburg and Emden. They supported good schools in academics and other things. These communities taught us the importance of integrity and dedication. This honor really belongs to those two communities.”

Hildebrand, who graduated from IWU in 1952 with a business administration and education double major, was captain of IWU’s 1951-52 basketball squad, was a two-time Most Valuable Player, and an all-conference team pick in the College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW).

He also was IWU’s first professional basketball player. When Hildebrand graduated from IWU, he was recruited by the Denver Nuggets of the National Industrial Basketball League (NIBL). Salary: \$500 a month.

Hildebrand, who was born in Lincoln, Ill., began his high school basketball career in 1944 at Emden (enrollment: 35 students), where he played for two years. Subsequently, he played one year at Hartsburg and one year for Hartsburg-Emden after the schools merged.

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As a high school freshman, Hildebrand was team captain and coach.

"For the first two years I played high school basketball," Hildebrand said, "we didn't have a coach. At 14, I was running the team. I grew up awful quickly."

Hildebrand was pressed into service as a coach due to a teacher shortage largely triggered by World War II.

As coach, Hildebrand recalled, he ran the team from the floor—not the sidelines. He was responsible for getting the lineups to officials. And, like all coaches, at times he disagreed with officials' calls.

"I held it," Hildebrand said, referring to the fact that he didn't lose his temper. "As a 14-year-old, I had to respect my elders."

Playing and coaching were only part of Hildebrand's "problems." His brother, Don, was a senior at Hartsburg High School and captain of the team, when Bob was playing for Emden. Before a basketball showdown between the two schools, Hildebrand's father—Henry, a businessman who was mayor of Emden for a record 44 years—cautioned:

"Now, when you two come out there," Hildebrand recalled his late father saying, "don't fight when you shake hands."

As a high school player, Hildebrand led the conference in scoring and rebounding for two years.

Hildebrand fondly remembers one game day, when his father needed him to help out on a job. He did it and hurried back for the game—a game in which he scored 36 points. This prompted his father to joke about "going to help me again" and you'll have a big night.

Hildebrand's basketball prowess was reflected in a Rocky Mountain News story, which appeared when he joined the Nuggets. The newspaper described him as a 6-foot, 3-inch guard, weighing 205," who "broke all scoring records at Illinois Wesleyan . . . In addition to his 21.6 points per game average, he was ranked high in the nation

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as a rebounder among the smaller schools. Hildebrand was president of both his senior class and the student body.”

He set an IWU single-season scoring record—408 points—breaking the old mark by 106 points.

A jersey links Hildebrand, IWU’s first professional basketball player, to Jack Sikma, IWU’s most renowned professional basketball player and the university’s all-time leading scorer. Both of these cagers wore No. 44 for the Titans.

On the eve of his first professional basketball game, reality set in for Hildebrand—the low pay, the insecurity of a sports career, and time away from his family for road trips. He left the team before the season opener to coach high school basketball for two years at San Jose, Ill. Later, he had a successful career as an executive with General Electric and Chicago-based R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co., the world’s largest printing company.

The Illinois Basketball Hall of Fame is located in the Holiday Inn in Normal, Ill. Members are voted in by the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association.

Hildebrand retired in 1992 as vice president-employee relations at Donnelley. He serves as a consultant to Donnelley and other clients in Minneapolis and Los Angeles.

Hildebrand and his wife, Ann, live at 680 Essex Rd., Glen Ellyn, Ill. They married in 1951, while IWU students. Ann graduated in 1954 with a degree in education. The Hildebrands have a son, a daughter, and four grandchildren.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.