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Jack Horenberger Reflects on 38 Years as a Coach and 33 Years as Athletic Director

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Continuity is the key word when Jack Horenberger reflects on 38 years as a coach and 33 years as athletic director at Illinois Wesleyan University.

"I think the thing that has been most beneficial to our athletic setup is continuity. Now I'd like to think that continuity can continue another 25 years or so as I look at Denny Bridges staying in this job until he retires," said Horenberger today after it was announced that he would retire as IWU's athletic director and baseball coach at the end of the current school year.

Bridges, the Wesleyan basketball coach since 1965, has been appointed athletic director, effective Aug. 1.

"He starts in good shape because he has the benefit of Don Larson and Bob Keck having been in the program for so many years," Horenberger said. Larson, the football and golf coach, came to IWU in 1954. Keck, the only full-time assistant in football, also is track and field coach and supervises the cross country and wrestling programs.

Horenberger never plays for more than a dime a hole in golf, but he looks back on what could be considered a gamble as one of the key moves in building the continuity of the staff.

The move came after Libero Bertagnolli resigned as football coach after the 1953 season.

One of the applicants was Larson, a former Titan football captain and a graduate of 1950.

"I was fortunate in that in hiring Swede I was probably taking a chance because his only coaching experience was in junior high school. What a blessing it turned out to be," Horenberger recalled.

"I didn't know Bob Keck that well but I trusted the recommendation of a friend, and that friend didn't let me down. In the case of Denny Bridges, when he graduated (in 1961), I knew that he was the guy I wanted to bring back to take over basketball when the school decided it could add a fourth man to our staff--and Lord knows he's done the job for us.

"Having the same people year after year has contributed, I think, to the rapport our department has with the administration and the rest of the faculty. They know they can trust us and that we don't badger them to get this guy or that guy eligible or into school."

There are those who claim Horenberger's blood is green, to match Wesleyan's color, and he is the first to admit that there is something special to him about the entire university, not just its athletic program.

The feeling wasn't always that strong. There was a turning point, he recalls, in 1947. "I was looking around. I had interviewed on some other jobs. I was seriously considering a position at Northern (Illinois University) and another one at Sycamore High School. But I came home from an interview and Mary Ann and I decided not to leave right then, Horenberger said.

"I'll bet it wasn't a month later that I was named athletic director and things seemed to clear up from then on. I couldn't be more pleased with the way the university has treated me."

Horenberger said he's in better health today than in many years. "I feel better than I did any of the last half dozen years of coaching basketball, when I seemed to feel the stress of coaching," he said.

Baseball coaching produced little or no stress for Horenberger.

"I was fortunate to be at a school that had a tradition of good baseball before I became coach. It was among the first schools in the nation to take a southern trip each year. Our tradition helped attract good players."

A move Wesleyan made in 1963, the abolition of any sort of athletic scholarships and basing financial aid on need, has helped make Horenberger's life more pleasant.

"When it was put in I was opposed to it and so were the rest of the coaches. We thought it would hurt our athletic program. Instead, it helped. It increased the size of our football squads and the teams were successful. Because of our success, the rest of the conference (College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin) followed suit about five years later. We found our athletes were a happier group because they weren't concerned that someone might be getting a larger scholarship than they were," he said.

"The CCIW is in the best shape it has ever been in. We have the best balance we have ever had and the so-called minor sports are better. I think the financial aid plan is the main reason."

Horenberger declared he has "absolutely no special plans" for retirement.

"The only thing I have thought of doing is spending the month of March in Sarasota (Fla.), particularly if Bobby (Winkles) is still with the White Sox," he said.

Winkles, a former Wesleyan basketball and baseball star who has been a coach with the Chicago White Sox the past two seasons, is one of the many outstanding products of Horenberger's career in education. The lives of thousands of others, many of them not athletes, have been touched by the smiling man from 1920 Garling Drive.

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