

The Star-Ledger

Dorfman: Blueprint for basketball was written by Blood

Wednesday, December 24, 2003

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The purest form of teaching basketball, says P.J. Carlesimo, is done at the high school level.

Considering how many high school kids are now going directly into the NBA, he's probably right. More about that in a moment.

P.J., the former Seton Hall and NBA coach, pays tribute to the high school coaches in a preface he contributed to a new book about Ernest (Prof) Blood, "basketball's first great coach."

Prof Blood was the almost mythical coaching architect, back in the early 1920s, of Passaic High School's 159-game winning streak, which has stood the test of time. Basketball has known its last 159-game winning streak.

It is probably still the longest winning streak in any sport at any level, although two others impress me as much: Edwin Moses' 107 consecutive title victories in the 400-meter hurdles, and 88 uninterrupted victories by John Wooden's UCLA basketball teams.

Anyway, despite his station in history, the full story of Prof Blood, the physical moralist, was essentially untold until now. It is in a book written by a long-time admirer named Charles (Chic) Hess.

Hess is something of a surprise. The Passaic streak is obviously a New Jersey legend, but Hess is a Philadelphia native who lives and writes in Hawaii.

An award-winning coach at every level in a 25-year career, non-Jerseyan Hess explains that he heard about the Passaic "Wonder Teams" while in Philadelphia, where basketball was his reason to live.

That led him later to develop the history of a Passaic team that once scored more than 100 points four times in one week, in an era when other teams routinely struggled to score 20. This was, after all, a mere 24 years since the indoor game itself had been invented by James A. Naismith, and how to play it was a work in progress.

All of those invincible Passaic teams are now safely stored in basketball's Hall of Fame, even if some cynics assert that the streak was not such a big deal. After all, basketball then was an uncertain science, and most teams may have been crude at best. Further, not many coaches applied the strict physical conditioning, the clever set plays and the long hours of passing drills that Blood introduced.

Actually, physical conditioning for all kids was an obsession with Blood, a concept that New Jersey expanded by law in its public school system right after World War I.

The last time I wrote about Prof Blood was in February of 1955. He had died two days earlier of a stroke in his retirement home in Florida.

By then, basketball had advanced well beyond the Passaic stage to another level. The center jump after every basket had been discarded and coaches had borrowed Blood's mantra: pass, pass and pass.

As he demanded of his pupils, you could get a basketball to a certain point a lot faster by passing it than dribbling.

His success was immeasurable. The streak did more than anything else to generate the growth into today's international game, which trails only football here in popularity.

Hess' book, published by the Newark Abbey Press, is a well-documented effort. An appealing device is a game-by-game report, including box scores in most cases, of every one of those 159 games, as well as the 160th, in which a Hackensack team finally brought an end to the streak.

As a sub title, it is accurately called the "True story of basketball's first great coach."

Despite his huge success that ultimately captivated the whole country, Blood wound up in nasty disagreement with the Passaic school board, which railed that basketball was overshadowing academics. Blood finally put his wife, Margaret, and three kids in his Model-T Ford and left to take a position at St. Benedict's in Newark. Even then, a coach was an endangered species.

Which brings me back to P.J. Carlesimo, whose late father, Pete, was then a student at St. Benedict's. In his preface, P.J. writes that he, himself, like Hess, had been raised in Philadelphia and become intrigued by the ongoing Prof Blood story.

The value of the high school coach probably occurred to him then. At that level, he says, the skills of the player are first developed, but not so that his habits hinder him from learning more fundamentals and new skills.

P.J. includes himself among coaches who were profoundly influenced by high-school mentors. One of the high school coaches he cites is Bob Hurley, an emerging legend himself at St. Anthony of Jersey City.

Hess' research, P.J. notes, uncovered so much of what had not been known about Blood, and justifies the Prof's place in history with all the great coaches in any sport in any era.

Somewhere in Blood's broad, disciplined approach was a free-wheeling spirit. Associated as an instructor with YMCA's, where early basketball flourished, Blood would cite Christian values as a primary motivation for success in life. At the same time, he kept a pet bear.

He acquired it as a cub, named it Zep, and wrestled with it often as it grew, until the bear hug became a menace. As one of his promotional instincts, he even used the animal to entertain at ball games.

He obviously would not have supported the recent bear shoot here.

The great coach claimed he used basketball as an educational tool for acquiring life skills. He was, above all, a teacher.

Have a great holiday.

Sid Dorfman appears regularly

in The Star-Ledger.