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Remembering Coach Blackburn: A Tribute to UD's Greatest Men's Basketball Coach

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Remembering Coach Blackburn: A Tribute to UD's Greatest Men's Basketball Coach

Writing Process

This project focused on using the University Archives to find and research a topic that we found fascinating. For this piece, my writing process consisted of a lot of exploring and searching through old Flyer News and sports pamphlets from the Archives. Once I had gathered sufficient research, my writing process consisted of a lot of planning, writing, and revising.

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Remembering Coach Blackburn: A Tribute to UD'S Greatest Men's Basketball Coach

Maddison Hosfeld-Henry

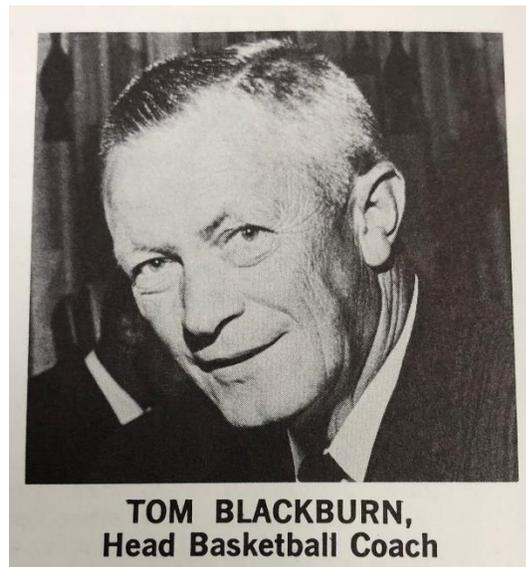
It was 1951. The Men's Basketball team was playing in the National Invitation Tournament semifinals, and the Flyers were down 7 points in overtime with six minutes on the clock. After lead scorer and future pro-basketball player, Monk Meineke fouled out, Coach Blackburn made the strategic decision to bench his second best scorer, Chuck Grigsby. With only a minute left in the game, Blackburn thrust Grigsby back on the court.

Renewed with energy and vigor,

Grigsby made a shot, and then passed the ball off for the winning basket.

Blackburn's tactic had paid off.

That season, the Flyers went on to win 20 straight games, shattering the prior school record. Just 5 short years before their victory over St. John's, Dayton Men's Basketball team was in a state of dereliction. Their season record was a meager 16 wins to 38 losses. To revive the collapsing team, Tom Blackburn, a physical education instructor for the Navy, and a successful high-school basketball coach, was hired and brought in. Although he was notorious for his strict, emphatic coaching style, Blackburn would go on to revolutionize Dayton's basketball program forever.



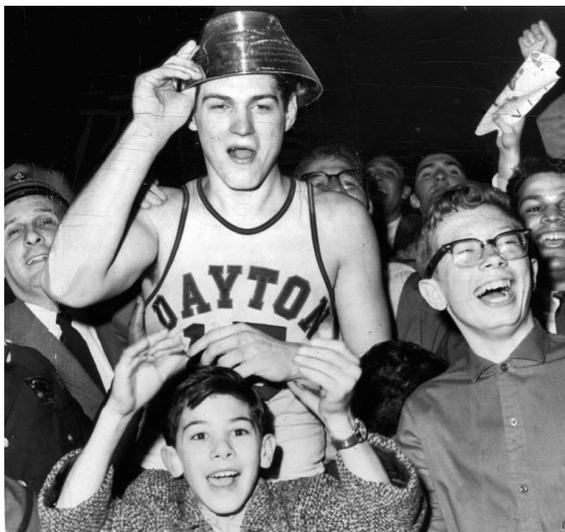


Tom Blackburn's "basketball dynasty" began with "his first recruited freshman team in the 1948-1949 winter" (Sheehan). During their first seasons with Dayton, Blackburn's freshman were virtually unknown. By their junior and senior seasons, however, "There [wasn't] a UD fan who [couldn't] recite

the accomplishments of this group after they became varsity performers" (Sheehan). Blackburn's first recruited team "was the team which eventually put the Flyers on the national collegiate basketball map" (Sheehan).

To this day, many of Blackburn's players, now dubbed "Tom's Boys," have gone on to become famous coaches and professional athletes.

Tom Frericks, a basketball legend and UD Hall of Famer, is one of "Tom's Boys" whose legacy stands on campus today. The Frericks Center, an academic hall and athletic building, holds almost 5,000 fans and is home to the volleyball court, athletic library, and Olympic-style weight room. Frericks, an Ohio native, only got the chance to play for Blackburn for 2 seasons before his back problems forced him to the sidelines. Blackburn allowed



Bill Chmielewski, pictured above, celebrates being named the MVP of the famous N.I.T. championship tournament game Madison Square Garden in 1962.

Frericks to remain with the team, watching on the bench and learning tips that he would later use in his coaching career. Commemorating his athleticism and talent, the Frericks center stands tall on UD's campus today.

Brian McCall, a leading scorer in his career at UD, and another one of "Tom's Boys," was inspired by Blackburn to pursue professional coaching after his

graduation and completion with UD. McCall held a successful career as a coach, attributing much of it to Coach Blackburn. He claimed, “Coach Blackburn has had a great influence on me and others who have followed me. ... It is a great feeling to go to meetings with my fellow coaches on the college level and hear the praise they have for Tom. He is respected by all” (Dowling 1964).

Other athletes, famous today after the legendary coaching of Blackburn are Ray Dieringer, Chuck Grigsby, Don Donoher, and many others.

If you were to ask any true UD fan what game comes to mind when thinking of Coach Blackburn, they will probably name the famous victory he led the team to at Madison Square Garden in 1962. This game has been called the “greatest triumph in UD’s athletic history” (Powell).

After a close game in front of over 17,000 fans, the Flyers beat out the Redmen of St. John’s 73-67.

The *Dayton Daily News* reported that “the reaction to UD’s victory was delirium from New York to Dayton,” (Powell). News stories report that following the win at Madison Square Garden, a caravan of honking cars drove around UD’s fieldhouse and campus celebrating. Students allegedly scaled light poles to place Flyer basketball flags, celebrating the victory. Daytonians even held a parade on Main Street.

The Flyers’ impressive win solidified Dayton’s reputation as a powerful and



skilled collegiate team.

After working with UD for 14 seasons,

Blackburn's hallmark win would kindle the fire of Daytonians’ obsession with Flyer basketball.

In 1949, the original Flyers Fieldhouse was constructed. At the time, Athletic Field Director Harry Baujan claimed, “You only build a

fieldhouse once, so you have to build it carefully”(McLaughlin). Eighteen years later, Dayton approved a \$4,000,000 plan to build a *new* 13,500 seat basketball arena (McLaughlin).



Don Donoher is pictured left filling in as head coach after Blackburn was suddenly hospitalized.

A testament to the growing obsession and demand to watch the Flyers play, the fieldhouse represented the love for basketball that Coach Blackburn had fostered in Dayton. “Blackburn had taken the obscure Flyer basketball program in the 1947-48 season and gave it national attention. ... They participated in 10 National Invitation Tournaments, finishing second in five and winning the 1962 tourney. He also participated in 12 other holiday and postseason tournaments, winning the University of Kentucky Invitational Tournament in the 1955-56 season” (McLaughlin).

Coach Blackburn worked with UD for 17 straight seasons and holds to this day, the school's second highest record with 352 wins to 141 losses.

In the winter season of 1964, Coach Blackburn was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. Remaining true to his tenacity, Blackburn coached as long as he could through the season, determined not to miss a game. In late February, Blackburn was hospitalized and passed away shortly after with 3 games



remaining in the season. Before his passing, Coach Blackburn had hired one of his past players, Don Donoher as an assistant coach.

In 1969 Coach Blackburn, along with Gene Westendorf, a prior UD Baseball coach, and Arthur Bok, a UD football coach, were inducted into the UD Sports Hall of Fame. It is Coach Blackburn who is credited for reviving and revitalizing Dayton's basketball program. After his passing, Blackburn's widow, Libby Blackburn-Morrison was determined to keep her late husband's legacy alive. Although Blackburn did not live to see the new fieldhouse constructed, his wife worked tirelessly to keep the fans just as excited about basketball as her husband's work with the team had done. Don Donoher, after he took over coaching for Blackburn said, "If what you see on the court at UD Arena is Tom Blackburn's legacy, what you see in the stands is Libby's" ("Celebration").

Donoher credited Libby with starting the phenomenon known as "Flyer Faithful," a term which represents the undying and indestructible love Daytonians hold for basketball. To this day, basketball is something that Dayton is known and celebrated for.

While Blackburn may be gone, his legacy forever remains.

As a current UD student, I can attest that basketball is just as celebrated as it seems to have been when



Blackburn was coaching. As of January 2019, UD celebrated a milestone, opening its doors for its 10 millionth fan (Jablonski)! Integrated into school culture, the love for the game is evident and strong as ever.

Before college, I wouldn't consider myself a basketball fan. I attended high school games begrudgingly. Although I was reluctant to attend a UD basketball game, my friends and family and some UD alumni encouraged me to attend at least one game. They claimed UD games were unlike any other.

Although I was skeptical, I wanted to see if they were right. After deciding to drag a friend to the Men's Exhibition game, I finally understood what the hype over Flyer basketball was about. The school spirit, the pep band, the warm-up music, the buzz and anticipation before the game, and watching the players dunk and hit three-pointers with ease gave me goosebumps.

UD basketball is certainly unlike any other college game I have seen. The passion and excitement in the arena can be felt and keeps fans coming back, selling out the arena constantly.

In the years since Blackburn's passing, an arena was constructed *again*. The team that once won just 7 games in 2 seasons, has gone on to host over 10 million fans, has been ranked number 23 in the nation, and has won over 10 Atlantic Conference tournaments. It is almost impossible to imagine the University of Dayton without thinking about the Men's Basketball team. Were it not for the determination and spirit of Coach Blackburn and the dedication and commitment to keep the Flyer spirit alive by Libby Blackburn, the University of Dayton and its beloved basketball team would probably cease to attract a community of so many loyal and dedicated faithful Flyers.

Coach Blackburn forever changed UD basketball. He made it something that would go on to be cherished and celebrated for years.

The legacy of Coach Blackburn lives on.

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