

THE IDLE AMERICAN

A Coach Who Did it Right...

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

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In a perfect world, coaches, parents and participants would rightly refer to sports aspirants as “student athletes.”

Today, however, this often is not the case. For many--in both high school and college--reference to “student athletes” is an oxymoron, as far apart as the east is from the west.

The best coaches--at all levels--first are teachers in the noblest sense, imparting life lessons first and sports second. I've known several who “got it right.” One was the late Paul Stueckler, head basketball coach at Midland Lee High School, 1961-1990. His zeal for teaching was unbelievable, work ethic unquestioned and passion for coaching unsurpassed....

Son of a Lutheran minister, Paul wasn't afraid of challenges. First, he took on coaching all sports at tiny Presidio, TX, High School in 1954. He was there for a year, followed by six more at El Paso Austin High School before he dared to introduce basketball to young men at Midland Lee High School upon its opening.

Introduced basketball? During most of Stueckler's years there, football was king. One guy--claiming Lee's district to be the “little Southwest Conference”--recognized only two sports: football and spring training. At Lee, Stueckler won six district championships and made the play-offs 13 times. In 1975, his LHS Rebels took Houston Kashmere to three overtimes before losing to the eventual champions who were undefeated the previous season. With more than 700 career wins, he was Texas' fourth-winningest basketball coach.

Stueckler's heritage included a strong work ethic, and he never let go. A graduate of Concordia High School in Austin, he favored playing football and baseball. For coaching, though, he chose basketball after his first year. While in Presidio, by the way, they played on a dirt court, but old-timers remember that he and his players cobbled together a wooden, “make-do” floor....

Son David experienced his dad's firm direction as a basketball player in 1977 and 1978. “He kept the gym warm for work-outs and warmer for games,” he recalls. Unforgettable are drills of rope-climbing, fingertip push-ups and lots of running.

Though animated and vocal, Paul never resorted to profanity. Armed with motivational stories and jokes, he grew serious when Hobbs, NM, High School was mentioned. Coached by legendary Ralph Tasker, the Eagles were the scourge of New Mexico, avoided by their non-

district foes. Stueckler scheduled Hobbs regularly, however, holding his own in most games and winning some.

He was more than resourceful. During games, he spoke reminders into a tape recorder, playing them back at halftime. Against Houston Kashmere in the 1975 semi-finals, Paul was certain that his lads would be uptight. So, he showed up in a tuxedo, finally losing to the state champions in three overtimes....

They asked him to help coach at Midland College following retirement at Lee, thus delaying plans to retire to Alabama, where he had enjoyed childhood visits that included much fishing. (There weren't many fishing holes around Midland.) After four years and hindered by a hip replacement, he and his wife, Gay, retired to Lillian, AL, where he planned to spend blissful days on his Perdido Bay fishing boat.

When word got out about his Lillian retirement, he was recruited once again to "help out" at Pensacola Junior College. Finally, health concerns caused him and Gay to return to Texas. Awaiting him, though, was one final assignment, this time at Collin College. Including parttime roles, he coached for 51 years, passing away in 2017 at age 84.

Both David and sister Laura Seale are grateful for strong parental guidance. "He had a high standard for character and an insanely high commitment to the work ethic. No cheating, foul words or facades were allowed," Laura remembers. "I'm in education, too, and learned from Dad to get inside kids' heads to teach them." David, also a University of Texas graduate, has served the Linbeck Group, a Texas-based commercial construction company, for 42 years, rising through the ranks to CEO 12 years ago....

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