

LIFE STORY

Old Abes coach dies at 86

By Ron Buckli

Leader-Telegram staff Harry Gibbs always felt he had the best seat in the house.

He sat at the end of the bench and watched his Eau Claire Memorial boys basketball teams roll up the points while piling up win after win after win.

"It was an absolute pleasure to play for him — he was a complete gentleman," said Stan Johnson, a 1962 allstate selection on that year's state runner-up team. "He was my favorite coach of all of them I had — by far."

Gibbs, 86 and a member of the Wisconsin Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame, died June 8 at home.

He grew up in Madison, was a basketball standout at what is now UW-River Falls and coached the Old Abes for nine years from 1956 to 1965.

It was a golden era in Memorial basketball as he led the Abes to nine Big Rivers Conference championships and took seven of his nine teams to Madison and the state tournament — two narrowly missing the title.

Besides the basketball record, it was the way he handled himself that was left with his players.

"You changed my life for good forever," Jeff Ellenson, an all-stater in 1965, said he wrote the family online about his coach. "Thank you, coach."

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Gibbs

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Gibbs/ Won 84 percent of games

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Gibbs amassed an amazing record of 185 wins and just 35 losses, an 84 percent winning rate. The mark of his teams was a smothering, highgeared offense.

"Harry was an offensive coach — he let us play," said Johnson, the school record-holder with 52 points in one game. "He gave us the freedom to play without restriction. He made the game fun for me."

Gibbs' 1962 team, which lost to Milwaukee Lincoln 93-80 in the finals of a game much closer than the score would indicate, averaged 83.9 points. The school record was set at 106 that year against La Crosse Logan.

In all, Gibbs saw his teams go over the century mark 11 times and regularly score over 80 points. And it all came with the low-key Gibbs planted quietly on the bench.

“His temperament was probably his greatest strength — he was so laid back,” said Bill Rowlett, who said he spent plenty of time next to him on the bench as a reserve on the 1961 team. “He seldom got mad and didn’t put any pressure on anybody. He had a calming influence.”

Ellenson was the tournament scoring and rebounding leader of the 1965 state meet in which the Abes led in the final two minutes before losing to Monroe 74-71. He had been a champion swimmer but went from 6-foot-3 and 180 to 6-foot-7 and 240 by his junior season.

“I was just in awe of him,” Ellenson said. “He said ‘you’re too big to be in a pool,’ and he took care of me from that point on. He got me shoes, a job and dates with the cheerleaders. I said ‘this is for me.’” Ellenson went on to play at Minnesota-Duluth, UW-Eau Claire and for many years professionally in Australia.

Besides the 1962 and 1965 state runner-up teams, the 1963 squad, powered by Vern Curtis, lost a 52-51 heartbreaker in the semifinals to Dodgeville, which went on to take the state crown the next night.

Gibbs’ free-wheeling offensive philosophy likely had its start at River Falls, where he teamed with such great players as Nate DeLong, Newman Benson and Wally Lindholm among others for four conference championships and three trips to Kansas City.

Gibbs was a feeder for DeLong the night the Chippewa Falls product scored 72 points against Winona State, saying, “we just threw the ball up by the basket and he put it in.”

“Harry always felt if you scored a lot of points, you’d win more than you lost,” Rowlett said.

But as successful as he was in teaching youngsters how to get down the floor and put the ball in the hoop, he was even more successful in teaching about a more important thing — the games of life.

“After all these years, the way he conducted himself and what he stood for stayed with me beyond basketball,” Johnson said.



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