



Bradley basketball Coach of the Century Charles 'Ozzie' Orsborn dies at 99

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Whenever Chuck Orsborn was honored late in life for his accomplishments as Bradley's most successful coach all-time, he deferred to the people he thought were more deserving of the praise.

"Truthfully, I didn't coach them," he told a luncheon throng of 600 in St. Louis, when he was inducted into the Missouri Valley Conference Hall of Fame in 2005. "They taught me how I should be on the bench. Paul Unruh taught me the jump shot. Bobby Joe Mason taught me you could dribble into a zone.

"I don't think, in my case, the coach was as important as the players. I've never seen a coach make a winning free throw or basket."

Orsborn died Sunday in Naples, Fla., at the age of 99.

Affectionately known as "Ozzie, Orsborn made his mark at Bradley as an athlete, coach and athletics director. His contributions to BU athletics were such that the school renamed its most prestigious award — formerly the Watonga, presented to a senior student-athlete who combines excellence in athletics, academics and community service — for him several years ago.

Orsborn came to Bradley as a student in 1935 and was part of the "Famous Five" teams that helped launch the basketball program to national prominence. But it was as head coach from 1956-65 that Orsborn made his most indelible mark.

In those nine seasons, his teams posted a 194-56 record and won three National Invitation Tournament championships in an era when that tournament was considered a virtual equal of the NCAA. His coaching tenure falls one season short of the minimum to be listed in the NCAA's all-time coaching records, but his .776 winning percentage, extended one more season, would tie him for 15th with the late great North Carolina coach Dean Smith.

As it is, Orsborn still is tied for sixth in the list of Division I coaches who won their first 100 games in the fewest tries. He did it in 120 games.

Under Ozzie, the Braves won NIT titles in 1957, 1960 and 1964, and they finished four different seasons ranked in The Associated Press Top 10, two more in the Top 20. Twice, they ended seasons ranked No. 4, and twice they ascended to No. 2 during the regular season, most notably after knocking off top-ranked Cincinnati, 91-90, on Jan 16, 1960.

That game was voted Bradley's "Game of the Century" when the university celebrated its first 100 years of basketball in 2003, and Orsborn was voted BU "Coach of the Century."

"But he never tooted his own horn," his daughter, Carolyn, said Sunday. "He'd say, 'I never made a free throw, never took the big shot, never dribbled the ball, so I don't think I ought to be taking credit.'"

Orsborn came to Bradley from old Deerfield Shields High School, now Highland Park. Recruited by A.J. Robertson, he was joined by Dar Hutchins, Kenny Olson. Carl Schunk, Ted Panish and Les Getz to form the nucleus of a team that would change the little school on Peoria's West Bluff forever.

For Orsborn's junior season, Robertson expanded Bradley's schedule beyond its traditional lineup of Eureka, Illinois Wesleyan and other state and regional schools. Playing and beating the likes of Indiana, Nebraska and Utah, Bradley suddenly became a national sensation and earned an invitation to the inaugural NIT at Madison Square Garden in New York at the end of the 1938-39 season. A loss there finished the season with an 18-2 record.

But the next season, Bradley picked up where it had left off. Among the victims that season was Oregon, which would go on to win the first NCAA championship in 1939. Bradley had a chance to participate, but opted for a return to New York and the NIT because it was more prestigious. The season ended with a 19-3 mark when Bradley took third place.

"We thought we could beat anybody," Getz once recalled. "We were a little cocky, I guess."

While at Bradley, Orsborn also earned varsity letters in baseball, football and track. He was good enough to play minor league ball in the New York Yankees' system before enlisting in the Army Air Force in 1941. He retired five years later as a lieutenant colonel.

In the midst of his military service, he married his Bradley sweetheart, Janet Moore, who preceded him in death in November 2007. The Orsborns returned to Peoria, and Ozzie coached the freshman basketball team for nine years before being named head coach.

As an assistant coach, he played a part in opening Bradley's doors to African-American players, and that continued as a head coach, with assistant Joe Stowell at his side. Young men like Mason, Joe Billy McDade, Shellie McMillon and Chet Walker played significant roles in the Braves' national prominence.

"When you're looking for a player," Orsborn once said, "you're looking for a player, not his nationality or his color or anything else. It's just, 'Can he play?'"

While Orsborn chose not to play the role of social activist while his players were being poorly treated during trips to the South, he did make a point when the University of Houston team paid a return visit to Peoria after the Braves' black athletes had received awful treatment there.

"Ozzie resented the way we were treated," McDade, now a retired federal judge, recalled. "We kicked Houston's butt when they came to Peoria. Ozzie wanted to have Houston's butt kicked."

Orsborn's daughter said she remembered her father's reaction to that trip to Houston as well. A white fan near the Bradley bench had been particularly vile, and Ozzie went looking for him after the game.

"He couldn't find the guy," Carolyn said, "but Dad said, 'If I'd have found him he'd have a tough time walking away when I was done.'"

Orsborn stepped down as coach in 1965, when he replaced John "Dutch" Meinen as athletics director. He served in that capacity until his retirement in 1978.

For nearly 30 years after that, the Orsborns spent winters in Florida and summers Wisconsin, never failing to stop in Peoria to visit with old friends on their northbound or southbound journeys. After his wife died, Ozzie settled in Florida year-round, enjoying the company of former Peorians and Bradley alums in the Naples area.

Orsborn is survived by his daughter, Carolyn Orsborn of Lacon, and a niece in Florida. His sons Charles Jr. and James, also preceded him in death.



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