Norm Stewart talks to his players

CE: KB Editor's note: *Boone Hospital will open the Virginia and Norman Stewart Cancer Center on Monday. The center will encompass all of Boone Hospital's cancer services from screening to treatment.*

The center is the latest testament to Norm Stewart's legacy at MU. When plans for it were announced in 2013 — 20 years after Stewart helped found Coaches vs. Cancer — the Missourian decided to look back at Stewart's life beyond the sideline at Brewer Fieldhouse and Hearnes Center. The occasion of the center's opening called for a review of the man remembered by — and sometimes oversimplified to — a moniker, Stormin' Norman.

Missourians love Norm Stewart because he is theirs.

Toughness, candor and a competitive spirit are essential qualities of the longtime Missouri basketball coach's personality. The same qualities are considered characteristic of the regional ethic, in big cities like St. Louis and especially + in + small towns like Shelbyville, Mo. Missouri, where Stewart was raised.

Sure, victory mattered. But Missouri's sentiment for Stewart would have stopped at affection had he not won as consistently or as long as he did. And his dedication to the state meant even more.

Stewart chose to play at what was then Missouri University after leading the Shelbyville High basketball team to the 1952 state championship game. At Missouri he developed his leadership as a two-time captain and earned All-American honors. He returned as the head basketball coach at age 32 and spent the next 32 years leading his alma mater to victory, mostly in the boisterous Big Eight Conference.

Over time, the charismatic leader became something more. Stewart developed a persona — "Stormin' Norman" — and he branded the state university's basketball program. Really, he branded the university and state, too. Mention the school outside the Midwest, and for a long time the first association for most people would likely have been his name or moniker.

Stormin' Norman became Missouri's caricature.

Caricatures magnify specific traits and throw away others. Stewart certainly had his idiosyncrasies, and many didn't mesh with the absolutes of Stormin' Norman. Sometimes they clashed, and in public.

He also struggled when others questioned if he'd become too powerful to be held accountable. At such times, the relationship between Missouri and its character was called into question.

Stewart's wife, Virginia, once suggested he could be the hero of a great novel. That such a distinctive character lived a real life makes his story — and the ones others tell about him — much more compelling.

●●● Beginnings of a folk hero

Once upon a time in the small Missouri town of Shelbyville, a young boy was led to believe he would live an extraordinary life. His mother, a woman of faith, told him not to be afraid.

"Your life is going to be different than anybody else's in the family," Leona Stewart said. "It will take you away from us in certain respects, but I just want you to know, we will understand."

Norm Stewart had the All-American story, bona fide folklore. He knew it, too.

Stewart narrates his mother's premonition in his autobiography, "Stormin' Back." It came true, of course — except that he never went that far away. His allegiances were to his home state, and he'd always be a damn proud, small-town Missourian who made something for himself and became a leader.

Stewart was born on Jan. 20, 1935, in Leonard, Mo. Missouri. A few years later, the family moved 14 miles southeast to Shelbyville, a town of about 1,000 people.

His father worked for Standard Oil, supplying gas, oil and kerosene to the local farmers who made up most of the town. His filling station is gone now, and the town was down to a population of 552 as of March 2013.

Many of the farmers are gone + , + too, but it remains the Shelby County seat, and the courthouse is among a handful of non-vacated buildings at the single blinking-light intersection.

A sign outside the courthouse reads, "SHELBYVILLE: home Town of Norm STEWART, COACH, MIZZOU TIGERS — SHELBYVILLE GRADUATE 1952." The name "Norm" has all but faded away.

Roy Blackford used to call Stewart and ask him, "Are we going to have a good year? The sign needs painting, and it's easier to collect money when you have a good year."

Blackford grew up, played high school basketball and graduated with Stewart. He recalls afternoon bike rides to nearby Shelbina for a soda, and other days spent in the pool halls (the town actually had two) or playing H-O-R-S-E in the school gym.

It was a carefree childhood in some respects but momentous in others. Stewart was 10 years old when World War II ended; he graduated from high school the year a Missourian's presidency ended amid unprecedented national prosperity. In a way, Stewart came of age with America, and in a place particularly isolated from cynicism.

Toughness is probably the quality easiest tied back to Shelbyville, but Blackford explains how the town also developed Stewart's sometimes-brusque directness and clear-cut view of right and wrong.

"Everybody is pretty much a straight arrow in a small town," Blackford said. "You get a reputation for something, everyone's going to know it."

Stewart's competitiveness developed early, both in the pool halls and on the basketball court. The story they still tell up in Shelbyville is about the game that ended in a tie.

"This is a true story," Blackford began when he told it again in the back office of the Shelby County Herald one day in March 2013.

In the early 1950s, high schools didn't have electronic scoreboards. A young kid stood on a chair and cranked up the points by hand. Separately, scorekeepers from each team tended the scorebooks.

Shelbyville High was playing in the finals of the Monroe City holiday tournament. Stewart, a junior, made a shot to pull Shelbyville within one point of Center High (now Mark Twain). The scorekeepers looked down to mark the basket in their books. A Center player stepped behind the baseline to throw the ball in.

> "Norm turned around and intercepted the inbound pass and put it right back in," Blackford said. "Just in a blink."

Center missed a shot at the other end, and then the final buzzer sounded. Shelbyville celebrated; Stewart's refusal to lose had delivered a one-point victory.

At least according to the scoreboard. The Center scorekeeper quickly claimed that, according to its book, Center had won by a point. Then Shelbyville's scorekeeper found that its book came to the same result.

Officials finally figured out that only the kid working the scoreboard saw Stewart's steal and second basket. The two scorekeepers were preoccupied marking his first.

Because of the prolonged post-game confusion, the officials decided the best thing to do was declare a tie and call both winners. Stewart disagreed.

"He was irate, I sure remember that," Blackford said, laughing. "And the one that kept score for us? She never kept score again."

●●● Instant legend

In the spring of 1952, Stewart graduated from a class of 17 and headed 75 miles south to Columbia. He had chosen to attend his home-state school — though he had taken a recruiting trip to the University of Kansas.

From nearly the beginning, his exploits at MU extended beyond the basketball court. Stewart would become an All-American and the second at the school to score 1,000 career points. His senior year, he set the school's single-season scoring record (506 points) and dominated the Big Seven Conference.

But during his college days he would also pitch on what is still Missouri's only national championship team in any sport — the 1954 baseball squad. He only tried out because Emil Kammer, a baseball player from St. Louis, said the team wouldn't win a game if Stewart made it.

According to "Stormin' Back," Stewart took the remark as a challenge — one made by a condescending city kid to a small-town kid. So, he bet Kammer a dollar.

Of course, Stewart made the team. He had a great arm, and over the season he added a little control. Coach John Simmons gave him a rare start deep into the College World Series against Oklahoma A&M ;, a team that had shelled Stewart in his debut early in the season. This time, he won.

●●●Forming the storm

Stewart graduated in 1956 a married man. He'd met Virginia Zimmerley as a sophomore and fallen in love. They'd married before their senior year.

At first Stewart dabbled in pro sports, playing 10 games for the St. Louis Hawks in the early NBA and then minor league baseball in the Baltimore Orioles' farm system. Neither worked out.

Sparky Stalcup, Stewart's basketball coach at Missouri, hired him back as an assistant. Through Stalcup, Stewart got to know Henry Iba, the renowned Oklahoma State coach. Both mentors helped Stewart get hired as the head coach at Northern Iowa — then Iowa State Teacher's College — in 1961. He was 26 years old, hardly older than some of his players.

Even then, though, he had an aura of authority. But before Stewart ever became Missouri's character, he developed his leadership style at Northern Iowa.

Craig Kneppe played at Northern Iowa from 1963 to 1966. One summer, he grew a goatee. Stewart took one look at Kneppe the next fall and told him to shave it off.

"Well, I did, and I didn't say 'Why' or 'But,'" Kneppe said. "You just didn't question him."

Another player, Phil Johnson, fondly recalls a Thanksgiving Day consisting of ham sandwiches, Pepsi and three practices. His favorite Norm story, though, is about the bus stop at a Minnesota gas station.

In 1964 +, + Johnson and three other starters had all transferred from Iowa State, and the two schools met in the first game of the 1964 season. Northern Iowa eked out the big victory but then suffered a letdown in its next game at Minnesota State-Mankato, losing in double overtime.

Late that night the team was passing a gas station in a Minnesota town when Stewart stood up and shouted, "Stop the bus! Stop the bus!"

He turned to the weary players sitting behind him and said, "I know the high school coach here. I'm going to have him open up his gym, and we are going to practice. You guys didn't work hard enough during the game."

The team watched Stewart get off the bus, enter the filling station and pick up the phone. A few minutes later he returned, expressionless.

"I got the babysitter," Stewart told the team. "We can't practice. You're home free."

They finished the season 23-4, the best of Stewart's Northern Iowa teams. Forty years later, Johnson asked Stewart if there was anyone on the other line that night. Stewart said, "You'll never know."

●●●Staying true to his state

Stewart tallied a 97-42 record in five seasons at Northern Iowa before Dan Devine, Missouri's athletic director, hired him as the head coach in 1967. He'd arrived — sort of.

Stewart's starting salary was just $14,000 — $1,000 more than he'd made in Cedar Falls — and his alma mater had gone 6-43 the previous two seasons combined.

As his reputation grew and he became Stormin' Norman, Stewart recruited Missouri kids by bluntly challenging their state loyalty. A handful of former players recall Stewart asking, "How can you even contemplate going to another school? Why wouldn't you go to Missouri?"

> "He had a presence," said Gary Link, a 1974 graduate and a longtime employee of the MU athletics department. "Imagine when he came calling: He's 6-foot-5, blond hair, walks tall and is selling his story. And every kid in Missouri knew who Norm Stewart was. We all knew the story: The All-American from Shelbyville, Missouri."

But the story of Stewart's 32 seasons at Missouri really starts in another small Missouri town, this one 80 miles south of Columbia.

During the 1968-69 basketball season, coaches from around the country swooped into Dixon, + , Missouri, + to see a high school player named John Brown. The 6-foot-7 forward led Dixon High to an undefeated record and the state championship.

When he recruited Brown, Stewart was still just a young, charismatic basketball coach. He wasn't going to win Brown with his presence alone.

Brown said many recruiters offered cash, credit cards and cars. With five siblings and a single mom making a meager wage at a shoe factory, Brown found the incentives tempting.

Stewart didn't do that. Instead, he learned everything he could about Brown and told it to him straight. Brown, an "idealistic 18-year-old," said he wanted to be a national champion. Stewart said he thought that with Brown, Missouri might have an outside shot at a conference championship. He said he wanted players who were competitive, confident and hard workers, and that he would push Brown as hard as any other player.

"I really felt like I could trust Coach Stewart to give me an honest chance at playing on a high level," Brown said. "I could have certainly used a few extra dollars, but I chose Missouri and Stewart. It was probably a poor existence, but I've never been sorry with the choice."

Stewart lived up to his word: He worked Brown hard, and the player became one of the best in the country, as well as Missouri history. During his senior season, the Tigers went 21-5 and ranked as high as No. 5 in the nation. They couldn't quite win a Big Eight Conference championship, but those early '70s teams are credited with the program's rise to prominence.

Three years later, the 1975-76 Missouri team won the school's first conference title since 1940 and went to the NCAA t Tournament for the first time in 32 years. The Tigers advanced to the Elite Eight, but despite Willie Smith's 43 points, the team lost to Michigan 95-88, falling just short of its first Final Four.

Kim Anderson, later one of Stewart's assistant coaches and now the head coach at the University of Central Missouri, was a junior on that team. He walked off the court upset but optimistic. + *(Editor's note: Since the original publication of this story, Anderson has become head coach at Missouri.)* +

"I remember telling Coach, 'You know what? We'll just come back and win it next year,'" Anderson said.

●●● Good, clean fun

But Stewart would take Missouri to the Elite Eight only once more in another 15 NCAA Tournament trips. He never delivered the school a Final Four.

In considering Stewart's stature today, one of the most fascinating aspects is how he built it without reaching a Final Four. The puzzle goes to the heart of how the game has changed.

Everything in college basketball today is a means to one end: March Madness. Conference tournaments are really about NCAA bids and seeds, and regular-season conference play counts for little more than building a quality NCAA Tournament resume.

Norm Stewart argues with referees

Stewart won eight conference titles (and six conference tournaments) when they meant more. When the Big Eight became the Big 12 in 1994, the Associated Press named Stewart "All-Time Big Eight Coach."

But after numbers and accolades, missing pieces remain. They are not found in record books, but in the way former players and coaches fluctuate between snickers and sighs when recalling the Big Eight glory days. Stewart's persona is pegged to a time and place, and a sentiment: good, clean fun.

Characters flourished in the Big Eight, where one-upmanship among coaches extended to theatrics. There was the time Nebraska coach Joe Cipriano grabbed the starter's pistol off the official scorer's table and fired it at a ref's behind to get his attention and stop the clock. Another night, Oklahoma coach Billy Tubbs grabbed the microphone and told fans to stop throwing things onto the court + , + "regardless of how terrible the officiating is."

Stormin' Norman was as colorful as any. The first time he faced new Kansas coach Larry Brown, Stewart watched him pick up two technical fouls. Stewart yelled, "Sit down! You haven't been in the league long enough!" and proceeded to match Brown with two technicals of his own. Stewart once called Tubbs a jackass; Tubbs called him "Francis the Talking Mule."

The intensity on the court was real, and it was personal. Other coaches had similar backgrounds to Stewart's. Tubbs said they were raised to believe that stepping on someone else's toes was better than biting your own tongue.

"It was in the moment; you got it off your chest and then you were through with it," Tubbs said. "If you were mad you said something, and you didn't apologize, but then it was over. That was one thing you learned growing up — you have to get over things fast and put it behind you. You can't linger with it."

Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione, who worked in the same position and lower ones at Missouri for 17 years, laughs in disbelief at the "legendary" things he saw or heard of coaches doing. He said the antics were heightened by the fact that most of the coaches were outstanding at their "craft," and they were guaranteed to face each other at least twice a season.

"It was a different time," he said. "Not to say that they were bigger than the game, and I don't think any of them ever wanted to be because they have such respect for the game of basketball, but they were part of the great experience."

The coaches saw competition as real-life theater.

"Life's basically nothing but a game," Tubbs said. "If you play a game and you lose, you're mad and you're disappointed, but you better get over it real quick and be ready for your next game. That's the way life is in general, isn't it?

"And you'd basically get mad at Norm because he won a lot. Back then, you weren't real popular if you won a lot. Because it was very competitive and people didn't like you if you beat them."

But Stewart and his cohorts also realized that the more hyperbolic the rivalries, the greater the entertainment. The sport wasn't the cash cow it is now, and they weren't making near the money today's coaches do. Hence, the extracurricular activities and impetuous press conferences.

> "In that era, (the brashness) was widely accepted and appreciated," Castiglione said. "That was a time when college basketball wasn't anywhere near the (commercial) popularity it would reach, and sometimes there were methods to a coach's madness."

The rivalry with Kansas was a perfect example. When the Tigers played in Lawrence, they would always stay in a hotel across the border in Kansas City, M o. issouri, and Stewart claimed he never had and never would spend a dime in the state. He later admitted this was a myth he purposely perpetuated. His hatred for KU didn't actually extend past the microcosm of competition.

Stewart got the nickname Stormin' Norman from the way he stalked up and down the sidelines during games at a time when few coaches did so. It antagonized opposing crowds, and he relished the psychological warfare with them because it was entertaining and it potentially gave his team an extra edge.

Julian Winfield remembers playing at Nebraska shortly after Tom Osborne's Cornhuskers football team won the 1995 national championship. Winfield says Nebraska fans might have loathed Stewart more than any other fan base, and they booed like crazy when the Tigers took the floor. On this night, though, the Missouri players came out in red-and-white shirts reading, "Congratulations Coach Osborne." The crowd went from vehement boos to raucous applause and finally an unsure buzz.

"They didn't know what to do," Winfield recalled. "It was hilarious."

By making himself a target, Stewart also deflected distractions away from his players.

"I remember as a young player that 'Sit down + , + Norm + , + ' chant bothered me," Link said. "He said, 'Don't worry about it, that's my shtick. When they quit saying, 'Sit down + , + Norm,' then they've got me figured out.'"

In today's transformed game, Stormin' Norman would come and go like a flash flood. It's a world of smartphones, social media and multimillion-dollar contracts.

Tubbs said his and Stewart's time is gone. If a coach picked up a microphone and said what he'd said, he'd "probably be fired, reprimanded for sure, and outcast." For better or worse, that sense of good + , + clean fun is gone.

"Big money changes you," Tubbs said. "If I would have been making + $ + 5 million dollars a year, I might have been the most politically correct sonu f v + abitch on the face of the earth."

After the final game of his career, a first-round upset to New Mexico in the 1999 NCAA t Tournament, Stewart said, "It's getting to the point that if you ask me my name, I might be able to give you that, and my serial number. Everything else is a 'no comment.'"

●●● The mucky years

By then, though, Stewart's own image had transformed. His integrity had been questioned, and he'd exhausted a lot of energy defending himself.

Some people, of course, had never cared for him. People who try to be all things to all people all the time are phonies, Gary Link says. There was nothing phony about Norm Stewart.

But as the years passed, his power grew, especially as the administration around him came and went. By 1988, Stewart was working under his sixth athletic director , + — + if he really worked under anyone at all. Some speculated Missouri's coach had become too powerful. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch wrote that Stewart had never been "saddle-broken by a Mizzou AD."

Then the media went a step further. In December 1988, T the Post-Dispatch published a series of articles in which several rival coaches and others questioned the basketball program's recruiting tactics in Detroit, alleging use of a + n + embedded middleman who encouraged players there to play for Stewart.

His relations with the media had been antagonistic before, over coaching tactics, but Stewart especially did not react well to the probing of his character. After the Post-Dispatch series ran, he allegedly told a reporter, "Listen, are you trying to hurt me? I know some people who can take care of your 1-year-old." Stewart later denied saying that, and the matter was eventually resolved.

Over the next few months Stewart lashed out at other reporters. Behind the scenes, assistant coach Bob Sundvold admitted to improperly loaning money to a player for an airplane ticket. The media reported this in February 1989, and the university suspended Sundvold on Feb. 8.

> The very next day, Stewart got sick on the team's flight to Oklahoma. It turned out he had eight ulcers, but doctors also found something worse: cancer in his colon and a diseased gall bladder. He underwent surgery the next week and announced he wouldn't be returning to coach for the rest of the season.

The NCAA began investigating the program in March, and over the next year a slew of minor allegations emerged. In October 1989, at the start of the next season, Stewart returned cancer-free and broke a nine-month silence.

''Men, I'm not going to change," he said at a news conference that athletic director Dick Tamburo and MU Chancellor Haskell Monroe also attended. "I've never listened to you (the press) and I won't listen to you now."

The following summer the NCAA charged Stewart with unethical conduct, saying he had knowingly violated rules. The charges didn't hold up, but when the final infractions report came back in November 1990, Stewart was found to have

suffered a “lack of institutional control.”

The university had failed to “adequately supervise the basketball program,” and Stewart had failed to “adequately supervise his assistant coaches … and, in general, operated a program separate from that of the rest of the athletics department without providing the necessary checks and balances …”

The program was placed on two years’ probation for rules violation and a one-year postseason ban.

●●● All or nothing

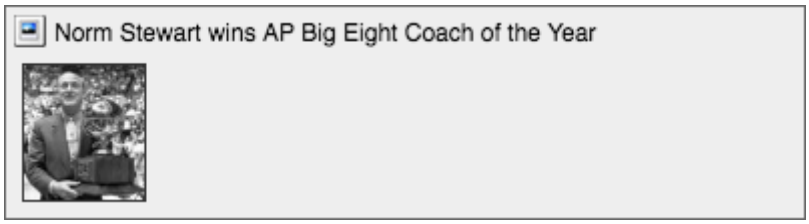
Stewart refused to mellow but instead reacted to both the investigation and his experience with cancer.

More than half of "Stormin’ Back," published in 1991, addressed the NCAA investigations. Stewart questioned whether the NCAA was just going for a big name and was applying its arcane rules as it saw fit.

Gary Link said Stewart always defended himself so vehemently when accused of a personality flaw because he saw morals in absolutes.

> “There’s a right way to do things, and there’s a wrong way to do things, and then there’s this ‘in-the-middle,’” Link said. “He never dealt with that ‘in-the-middle.’ There was very little gray in Coach Stewart’s life.

“I think that’s why he ran into problems. I think he did run most of his life black and white. I’m not saying that’s right or wrong. But I don’t think he dealt with the gray areas very well. When the gray areas would come, I think he would kind of go into a shell ... . I think he kind of looked at that gray area as a distraction.”



In 1991 Stewart and Jerry Quick, who headed the American Cancer Society in Columbia, came up with the “Three-Point Attack” fundraising effort. For every three-pointer the Tigers made that season, money would be pledged for cancer research. Stewart got other schools in Missouri involved too, and the final donation tally that year exceeded $300,000.

Stewart worked with National Association of Basketball Coaches to take the “Three-Point Attack” nation al wide + in 1993, and soon it was renamed Coaches v. Cancer. In another two years, more than 100 schools were participating. President Bill Clinton honored Stewart at the White House with the American Cancer Society’s “Courage Award.”

His 1999 retirement only invigorated his involvement. But even since 2007, when he had a pacemaker installed (and was inducted into the National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame), or 2009, after he stopped working a salaried job as special consultant to the MU chancellor, Stewart has kept striving.

At the 2013 Final Four in Atlanta, Coaches v. Cancer celebrated its 20th birthday, by which time it had raised nearly $90 million. National director Jim Satalin told the Kansas City Star, “This sucker still does more for us than 90 percent of the coaches.”

●●● Stewart's last song

Though some of his later teams struggled or underachieved, Stewart didn’t lose his intensity on the sideline, either.

> “To call him ‘extremely passionate and competitive’ doesn’t even cut it,” said Brian Grawer, who played on Stewart’s last two teams. “You need a more descriptive word.”

In 1998 Missouri began conference play at Kansas State. The Wildcats led 53-22 by halftime. In the locker room, a seething Stewart took Grawer, a freshman point guard, and his teammates back more than half a century to a childhood fight with his older brother. The brother had Stewart face down on the concrete with a knee in his back, but he wouldn’t cry "uncle." Stewart told his brother he would have to break his arm before he would give up.

Grawer says he was ready to fight back in the second half. But then Stewart told him to take a seat on the bench.

With two other leaders also on the bench, the game got ugly. As Kansas State built an 18-0 run, Grawer begged Stewart to put him back in the game. The coach refused.

"He said, 'You're going to sit your ass here on this bench and watch the game with me, and I hope it makes you sick. It's your job to never allow this happen to one of your teams again,'" Grawer recalled.

People thought Stewart was playing a prank when the coach announced he would retire April 1, 1999. But he claimed to have made up his mind that year at KU's Allen Fieldhouse as the fans regaled him with the regular chant: "Sit down, Norm." This time, he decided he would.

Stewart left the game with 634 wins at Missouri and 731 total, the seventh-most in Division I college basketball at that point. He had played or coached in more than half of the school's games.

Grawer had just finished his sophomore year. He saw how drained Stewart was, but the announcement still came as a jarring surprise.

"I think the hardest part to realize was that he wasn't going to be on the sideline for the University of Missouri anymore," Grawer said. "You just pictured Coach Stewart would always be there."

●●●A fierce and enduring love

Castiglione said Missourians love Stewart because he offered a special kind of hope.

> "Sports mirror some of life's challenges, and people live vicariously through sports because of what it does to lift the spirit," he Castiglione said. "You have a person who grew up in the state of Missouri and stayed there when he could have gone wherever, and he became a Hall + - + of + - + Fame coach at his alma mater. That's a superb role model."

If you ask, his players will tell you about Stormin' Norman, the character and coach. But they'll also talk about later getting to know Norm Stewart, the man who traveled to Cedar Falls when Craig Kneppe was inducted into Northern Iowa's Hall of Fame, who sat in the waiting room when Kim Anderson's son was in surgery, who offered his house to John Brown when his wife had an extended stay in the hospital.

They'll tell you about a father figure and friend who doesn't take loyalty for granted.

"But I think his character comes through greater after you leave the program," Brown said. "He's always stepped up and found a way to get a guy through a tough spot." ."

Supervising editor is Greg Bowers.