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In Memoriam: Al McGuire

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In a profession filled with memorable characters there is none I will remember better and with more affection than Al McGuire who died today at age 72 after an extended battle with anemia.

McGuire arrived at Marquette University as head coach in 1964 after seven seasons at Belmont Abbey outside Charlotte, North Carolina. The next fall I arrived at Marquette University to begin work on an M.A. in History, and it was in this setting that I first developed my admiration for him as a coach and as a human being. 1965 was also his first winning season (14-12) as head coach of the Warriors.

From the first time I watched Al and his team in action I liked what I saw. His first years at Marquette did not produce great basketball, although his teams were always competitive, because he was always competitive. To draw the fans to the old Milwaukee Arena McGuire himself provided the show. Animated on the sidelines and always finding something outrageous to do or say, Al delighted the fans. In the beginning they came to see him and within two years they were coming to see the basketball.

As a teaching assistant in a large Western Civilization course I happened to have several of McGuire's new recruits at Marquette. They were interesting and talented players and willing, if not always brilliant, students. Above all they knew they were in a university and they understood the need to attend class and study. McGuire and his staff kept a close eye on their athletes as students, but never intruded into the classroom environment.

Two things were striking about McGuire's approach to the educational side of college sport. He saw the athletic scholarship as an opportunity for his players to get an education that would serve them after basketball. Marquette basketball players in the McGuire era would remain as students with assistance as long as it took them to complete their degrees. He knew that some of his players would not have been in college without basketball, or at least they would not have been in a private Jesuit university of high quality. He was determined that they would not leave empty handed from that experience.

Second, neither Al McGuire nor any of his staff ever intervened in the classroom on behalf of their players. There was no pressure applied on anyone to keep a player eligible. The only pressure was on the player.

As a teaching assistant I was involved in a case in which one of the star players was caught cheating in an exam. At no time did any of the teaching assistants or the professor hear one word from anyone on the basketball staff. The player himself failed the class and took it again in the summer session. I found that extraordinary at the time, and still do, given the kinds of pressures that I have seen applied at other institutions.

As for his coaching style Al McGwire was the motivator and the teacher. He generated the intensity. And he surrounded himself with people who understood the intricacies of the game. His teams were marked offensively by sharp passing, cutting off of screens and back-screens, and team play that exploited whatever weaknesses could be found in the opposition. McGuire's teams could pick apart a zone defense with the precision of safe crackers.

The heart and soul of an Al McGuire team was displayed on defense. Here the intensity of the coach was most obviously transferred to the players who played a pressing full-court zone press. When the occasion called for it McGuire would use match-up zones, box and one, triangle and two, or fierce man-to-man. He loved creating "gimmick" defenses against teams that had big stars or high rankings. Usually an opponent would face several if not all of these defensive schemes in a game. Always he wanted to disrupt the offensive flow and keep the opposition players off balance. It didn't always work but it was a joy to watch.

Personally McGuire was as colorful as they come. The clothes, the sideline antics, the willingness to take an early technical to pressure the officials, were all part of McGuire's show. He was the first to exploit the television time-out a tactic that ultimately forced a reduction of timeouts in TV games. His routine for home games included a ride through rural southeast Wisconsin on his beloved motorcycle.

It was however the quotations for which he will be best remembered and his loquacious style served him well when he

went into broadcasting. As color man he was the best because he understood, as so many do not, that college basketball is a game.

The phrases he left behind are funny, poignant, and often cut to the heart of the matter. Some have become standard in sports broadcasting. The desperation shot at the buzzer, became in McGuire's parlance, "the Hail Mary." Terms like "cupcake," "French pastry," "Aircraft carrier," and "Space eater," are now in common usage.

As for the quotes, you gotta love a coach who says, "I don't think any decent human being enjoys recruiting." On why he never took an NBA job: "I'll never coach players who make more money than I do."

Then there are the off center observations on life: "All love affairs end. Eventually the girl is gonna put curlers in her hair." Or, "If the waitress has dirty ankles, the chili is good." Those who were around the Marquette Campus in the mid-Sixties will remember that place.

When his team finally made it to the Big Dance (a term Al made famous and may have coined) and walked away with the NCAA championship it was a memorable moment as Al sat on the bench in tears. No one could have enjoyed this moment more, and no college basketball coach ever deserved it more.

His self-evaluation is characteristic of the man: "I was the Houdini, who did the disappearing act. I know that 85 percent of me is buffalo chips, and the other 15 percent is rare talent." An excellent assessment. Then he went on in his usual befuddling style: "I'd say in that 15 percent, in the mental toughness, the media, keeping an eye on the elephant, not the mice, and extending the life of the extinct kiwi bird, which is nocturnal." Elephants, Mice, Kiwi birds. But of course.

Al McGuire will be missed by all who ever had any contact with him. He will be missed even more by those who never will.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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