

Johnny Orr belongs in Hall of Fame

Written by Jim Ecker

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Imagine a Big Ten basketball coach inviting a wide-eyed young sportswriter from the college newspaper into his office to listen quietly as his staff discussed the scouting report for its NCAA tournament game against Notre Dame.

It wouldn't happen today, but it did nearly 40 years ago when Johnny Orr was getting ready to coach the Michigan Wolverines against Digger Phelps and the Fighting Irish down in beautiful Tuscaloosa, Ala., in March of 1974.

One of Michigan's assistant coaches - it may have been Jim Dutcher - suspected that Notre Dame star Adrian Dantley had trouble going to his left, so the Wolverines were going to overplay him to his right and slow him down.

Johnny loved that piece of information. "Jimmy!," he exclaimed to the young sportswriter, "We're gonna drill 'em!"

And they did, 77-68.

Johnny made it fun for everyone, including a kid reporter who didn't realize at the time how special the "old" guy was (Orr was 46 at the time).

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Ten years later, that kid reporter began covering some of Coach Orr's games at Iowa State, glad to see him so happy and so popular in Ames after his choppy tenure in Ann Arbor, where he was not always greatly admired and where a U-M undergrad once ran for student council on the sole platform of "Dump Johnny Orr."

Orr turned the moribund Cyclones into one of the best college basketball stories in the country in the 1980's, and some of those games against Larry Brown and the Kansas Jayhawks, Billy Tubbs and the Oklahoma Sooners and Norm Stewart and the Missouri Tigers were classics, win or lose, seemingly always coming down to the last shot in a 74-72 thriller.

It got so loud in Hilton Coliseum, the court seemed to undulate from the shrieks and screams from those Iowa State fans, who loved their coach and loved their team. And oh boy, did Johnny sure make it fun to be around.

Coach "O" had a colorful vocabulary, to say the least, and it didn't matter if the television cameras were rolling and the tape recorders were hot. If he had something to say about an official - "That damn Woody!" - he was going to say it.

That two-hour drive from Cedar Rapids to Ames on Highway 30 could get a little treacherous in the dead of winter, especially when it was still a two-lane path most of the way, but the redeeming feature of those journeys was getting to spend more time with Orr, enjoy the atmosphere at Hilton Coliseum and watch good basketball.

Orr is the winningest coach in school history at Michigan with a 209-113 record. He's also the winningest coach at Iowa State with a 218-200 mark, giving him the rare distinction of having more than 200 wins in the Big Ten and Big 12.

He took his teams to 10 NCAA tournaments, including the national finals in 1976 when Michigan lost to Bobby Knight and the Indiana Hoosiers, but his favorite NCAA trip came with the Cyclones in 1986 when they stunned Michigan - the school that never really embraced him - to reach the Sweet 16 and make national headlines.

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Orr had a bad case of the flu the day the Cyclones whipped his old team up in Minneapolis, detracting only slightly from the favorite victory in his coaching career, bar none.

Orr's overall record of 466-346 in 29 years as a head coach - including stints at Massachusetts, Michigan and ISU - does not rank with the giants of the game, but you have to look beyond the numbers to truly appreciate what he accomplished.

He was honored as the National Coach of the Year in 1976 and twice was named the Big Ten Coach of the Year. He entertained legions of fans and was everybody's friend, except for some of those damn officials who he swore were out to (bleep) him.

He was colorful, he was fun, he was a terrific coach and he left a tremendous legacy. Johnny Orr is gone now, dead at 86, but the memories will linger forever.

His final resting place should be the Hall of Fame.