

# Blood's Legend Lives On

Section C, page 1

Thursday, October 9, 2003

By Jack De Vries

Chic Hess' eyes burned, his stomach was empty, and his lanky body ached from sitting in front of the microfilm machine all day. But he couldn't stop. Hess was chasing a ghost—a legend trapped in reels of old newsprint, flashing across the screen in front of him.

If only he could learn the entire story, Hess believed, he could tell the world about a forgotten basketball genius—Ernest A. “Prof” Blood, leader of the Passaic High School “Wonder Team.”

“The more I learned,” says Hess, “the more fascinating Prof's story became. It was about time the sports community learned what took place.”

The result of Hess' search is his first book, “Prof Blood and the Wonder Team: The True Story of Basketball's First Great Coach.”

His attraction to the Passaic coach began as a teenager after Hess read a 1959 story about the Wonder Team—winners of 159 games in a row from 1919 to 1925. Hess, a basketball-playing high school sophomore from Levittown, Pa., was stunned.

“It was tough to win a couple of games in a row,” he remembers thinking, “let alone 159.”

So began his obsession with Passaic's incredible win streak and the coach behind it—one Hess would carry through his entire adult life. After following Blood into the coaching ranks—which only heightened his appreciation for the man—Hess began trailing him back through time, learning more about Blood in libraries across the country.

When he retired from his 25-year coaching career, he began hunting Blood's story in earnest—even traveling from his Hawaii home to Passaic where it all began.

Older local residents know of Blood—the short, stocky, bear-wrestling coach, who elevated Passaic into the center of the basketball universe during the Roaring Twenties. Most remember his stars, players like Johnny Roosma, Bobby Thompson, and Fritz Knothe, powering a squad that beat all comers, including college teams.

But none, Hess feels, ( knows )the entire story. “It's been lost in history,” he says, “until now.”

Hess' story of Blood is chronicled through the Wonder Team's streak, complete with game accounts leading up to and following each contest. He also details the controversy that led to coach's resignation and the end of a basketball era—but not before Blood gave birth to the fast-paced style of play later know as “East Coast basketball.”

“Blood was known as a ‘scientific coach,’” Hess says. “He did things that put him generation ahead of his time, as far as training methods, offense, defense, fast breaking, and the full-court press. He believed in five people working together, always knowing where the other one was.

“And he believed in the pass—his players didn't dribble the ball much.”

Blood's basketball lessons were absorbed by many.

“The great coach Clair Bee came to watch Blood's team,” Hess says. “So did Frank Keaney, who created his ‘point-a-minute’ teams at Rhode Island. Buck Freeman played against Blood's West Point team and saw how he controlled the game with the pass. Later, he used that same style when coaching his St. John's ‘Wonder Five.’”

Beyond his incredible record at Passaic, Hess' book explores Blood's soul.

“He trained boys to be men, not basketball players,” Hess says. “Winning was incidental and the by-product of everything he did. Losing was never an issue. If it happened, Blood considered it a learning experience.”

Blood himself was an amazing athlete—an excellent gymnast, fencer, wrestler, and football and baseball player—with a passion for physical fitness. On his 64th birthday, Hess tells, Blood did back handsprings across the gym floor at St. Benedict's Prep during an assembly held in his honor.

“He didn't emphasize conditioning like we would today,” Hess says, “but more so than other teams. His players would not smoke or break training. Blood would say, ‘We don't work on conditioning, we work on living clean.’”

What also struck Hess was the coach's passion for sportsmanship.

“Teams that lost to Passaic,” says Hess, “said Blood's players' demeanor was impeccable and they were well treated by Passaic fans. Once or twice, Blood stopped a game to chastise the home crowd, saying, ‘We don't do this here.’”

It's easy to see why the author feels a kinship with Blood.

A self-described recovering basketball addict, Hess began as a player for Bishop Egan High School and played his college ball at Trenton Junior College and East Stroudsburg University. He later coached at Pennsylvania's Medill Bair School, Loyalsock Township High, and Lebanon High,

leading the school to the 1978 state finals behind future NBA player Sam Bowie.

Hess made the jump to Brigham Young University-Hawaii as an assistant in 1983 and became head coach in 1987 through 1990. He also coached at Columbia Basin College and Arizona Western College. During his career, he amassed a 230-81 high school coaching record and earned numerous coaching honors, including the NABC-Kodak Junior College Coach of the Year.

But wherever life took him, his mind always drifted back to Blood and his Wonder Team.

"In mid-1980s as I studied for my doctorate," he recalls, "I lived in libraries. I'd get sidetracked and begin looking up information on Blood."

Hess started writing to the children of the Wonder Team players, gathering information from old scrapbooks and photos. He later traveled to Burlington, Vt., to meet Blood's son Ben—even seeing the pelt of Blood's pet bear cub Zep, the Wonder Team's mascot.

However, it was his journeys to the Passaic Public Library that yielded the most information.

"Each time, I set aside two weeks for my trip," Hess says, "and each time, I ended up extending my stay by a few days. I'd be there from when they opened at 9 a.m. until they closed. I lost about 15 pounds each trip because I never took a break to eat."

After every visit, Hess would lug pounds of copies of newspaper stories back to Hawaii.

"Chic's book is a labor of love," says Passaic reference librarian Jean Ellis. "He spent an awful lot of time here, pouring over the old newspapers stored on microfilm, which is a horrendous job. He is also very concerned about accuracy, often e-mailing us to check a headline or statistic. And this has been going on for the last four or five years."

Finally satisfied that he had gathered all the material he needed, Hess was ready to write his story. The trouble was he had never written a biography. He called Leon Edel, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of author Henry James, for advice.

"I called on a whim," Hess says. "When I asked him how to write a biography, Leon said, 'Know your material and then sit down without your notes and write your story.'"

And that's what Hess did, giving readers a look at one of the most incredible runs in sports history. Along with the streak, Hess also details the struggle for power at Passaic High between Blood and principal Arnold D. Arnold—a man who saw basketball as a distraction and undermining education.

Hess writes of their feud that blasted across the headlines of the competing *Passaic Daily Herald* and *Passaic Daily News*—with each newspaper taking sides. Hess even ventures a theory that the *Herald's* anti-Blood position might be attributed to the benching of the publisher's son, Dow Drukker, during the streak.

"When the controversy started," Hess said, "it was like North against the South, with the *Herald*, Arnold, and the Board of Education lining up against the *Daily News*, Blood and the rest of the city.

But what Hess hopes readers ultimately will take from his book is the story of a lost basketball giant.

"Blood moved on after his resignation," Hess says, "coaching at St. Benedict's Prep and West Point. But he never left Passaic. He continued to live at his home at 31 Spring St." until he retired in 1949.

With his book, Hess has made sure Blood will never leave Passaic again.

*"Prof Blood and the Wonder Team: The True Story of Basketball's First Great Coach" by Dr. Chic Hess, published by Newark Abbey Press, is available by calling (800) 247-6553 or through local bookstores.*

