

Writing in Blood of former area coach

(Wed, Jul/02/2003)

His weathered, flower-print shirt and flip-flop sandals betray the side of Chic Hess that worked as a beachside concessionaire in Hawaii. But his furrowed brow and fist, pounding on the table, bring back the hometown boy with street-ball roots.

His "Dr." tag, hefty manuscript and sleek briefcase paint Hess as an academic. An historian. A salesman. But his words drip with the passion of a sideline-pacing coach.

"This is a story that has to be told," Hess says. And he means it, to the point that this South Philly native, former Levittown resident and current island dweller spent the last 17 years researching and writing a book.

It is the story of Ernest Artel "Professor" Blood, the legendary but little-known basketball coach who guided his teams at Passaic (N.J.) High School to a whopping 159 consecutive wins over six seasons from 1919-25.

Blood was enshrined in 1960 as the National Basketball Hall of Fame's very first high school coach. The honor came five years after Blood's death and three decades after Prof, as he was nicknamed, and his "Wonder Teams" put the infant game of basketball on the global map.

But they would soon fall completely off of it. Blood's impressive line got lost as the game he loved grew. Basketball found its Phog Allens and John Woodens over the years, but where was Blood's due?

Hess wondered that when, as a student at Bishop Egan Catholic High School in the late 1950s, he spotted a retrospective blurb about Blood in the local sports pages. The young basketball fanatic was immediately fascinated.

"To win 159 in a row? That always stuck in my mind," says Hess, 60, a 1961 Bishop Egan graduate who grew up playing basketball on the courts of the Indian Creek section of Bristol Township. His book, scheduled for release in September, is called "Prof Blood and the Wonder Teams: The True Story of Basketball's First Great Coach."

Hess' hoops-laden life took him to Trenton Junior College, where he played under Howie Landa, and East Stroudsburg University, where he finished his playing career in 1967. Hess began coaching basketball the following year at Medill Bair in the Pennsbury School District, later moved to Lebanon High School, then down to Brigham Young University-Hawaii. He ended up at Arizona Western College.

Through more than 200 victories and various Coach of the Year awards, Hess never forgot about Prof Blood. He gathered and saved as much information as he could find in record books or old papers. And finally in 1986, while studying for his Ph.D. in physical education at BYU, he really started to dig in.

Hess wrote his doctoral thesis on Blood's accomplishments and, at some point, reached a life-changing decision. With his coaching and academic careers nearing an end, he would become an author. The first and only one ever to tell Blood's story.

"The story was so fascinating, and I said, 'No one knows this. I have to tell it,'" says Hess, who lives in Kailua, Hawaii, with Linda, his wife of 38 years. The couple has three adult children. "I said, 'The basketball community and sports fans have got to know what took place in this era.'"

That's the same passion that drove Hess to success in life. He started out as a self-described "basketball bum" who cared nothing for his books. But as he rode his sport to a college education and coaching career, he saw more doors open than he ever dreamed.

One door - a college job opening - led Hess from Pennsylvania to Hawaii. He taught, coached, sold snacks at a hotel on the north shore of Oahu, got involved in the American Association of Heath, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD). He's currently the vice president for sports of the organization's southwest district. Living in the Aloha State, Hess says he learned to "hang loose."

That attitude changed about 10 years ago, though, when Hess stopped coaching and decided to focus all of his energy on the Blood book. He traveled back and forth to Passaic, N.J., spending countless days researching the Wonder Teams in the local library. He made hundreds of phone calls, wrote hundreds of pages, edited tirelessly.

The finished product illuminates the personality of both subject and author.

"What Chic did is really very special," says Mark Auerbach, Passaic's City Historian and one of Hess' chief sources of information during the project. "He's not native to our area. He's a rabid, avid sports fan, and as a coach and player himself, he found in Blood something that reminded him of himself. And he captured the essence of the man [Blood]."

Indeed, Hess' passion for storytelling was the same kind that Passaic residents at the turn of the 20th century came to expect from Prof Blood on the basketball court. The similarities don't end there.

Like Blood, whose remarkable tenure at Passaic High was cut short due to a meddling school board, Hess says he dealt with plenty of jealous administrators during his career.

Like Blood, Hess had his own wonder team. And he, too, built a stellar legacy.

Hess led Lebanon High to the PIAA Class AAA state finals in 1978. That team, which included future Kentucky star and NBA prospect Sam Bowie, lost the championship to Pittsburgh Scheney.

The Lebanon Daily News recently hailed those '78 Cedars as "arguably the county's finest team of all-time." The newspaper still calls Hess, who coached there for eight seasons from 1974-82, "probably the most revered and respected head coach that Lebanon has ever had - in any sport."

That kind of recognition is nice, Hess admits, but he'd rather his current project get the media attention. You can see this in his face and demeanor.

He'll wax nostalgic about his own past in a soothing, laid-back voice, as if he's shooting the breeze with a patron by the pool. But bring up Prof Blood, and Hess is all business.

"Someone is going to find this book so fascinating that they're going to make a movie out of it, and the whole world is going to know who Prof Blood was. And rightfully so," Hess says. "He deserves his place in history."

MORE ABOUT CHIC HESS

Age: 60

Birthplace/Hometown: Philadelphia/Levittown (Indian Hill)

High school/College: Bishop Egan Catholic (1961); Trenton Junior College, East Stroudsburg University (Master's, 1967); BYU-Provo (Ph. D., 1986).

Coaching career: Medill-Bair School (1968-72); Loyalsock Township High School (1972-74); Lebanon High School (1974-82); Brigham Young University -Hawaii (1983-85 assistant, 1987-90 head); Columbia Basin College (1986); Arizona Western College (1990-93).

Current occupation: Elementary school physical education teacher; Vice president, sports division of AAHPERD Southwest District.

Resides: Kailua, Hawaii.

Family: Wife Linda (Hornberger), three children.

The Book: "Prof Blood and the Wonder Teams: The True Story of Basketball's First Great Coach"; Sept. 2003, Newark Abbey Press, \$29.95, Foreword by P.J. Carlesimo. To order a copy, call BookMasters at 800-247-6553. To read more about the book, [click here](#).

Jennifer Wielgus can be reached at 215-949-4213 or e-mail jennifer.wielgus@phillyBurbs.com.

Article's URL:

<http://www.phillyburbs.com/pb-dyn/news/108-07022003-117609.html>