

REFLECTING ON RICKS COLLEGE ATHLETICS

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Editor's Note: We invited several members of the campus community who were close to the intercollegiate athletics program to share some of their favorite memories.

Bryce Rydalch—Athletics

THE FIRST YEAR OF WOMEN'S FAST PITCH

The first year of women's fast pitch softball was filled with memories. Coach Larry Stocking led an enthusiastic group of young ladies to the 1996 conference championship. Ricks College hosted the Region 18 tournament, and in the final game pitcher Monica Hurley threw a perfect game against Colorado Northwestern. The final out was unforgettable. With two outs in the last inning and Ricks leading by one run, Hurley faced the best hitter in the league. With the wind blowing in from center field, the CNCC batter hit a deep fly ball to right field that looked like a sure home run, but the wind carried it foul: strike one. Again the CNCC hitter hit a deep fly ball to right field, and again the wind took a sure home run and blew the ball foul: strike two. Hurley reached deep, and with that famous "grunt," threw her best fast ball past the swinging hitter for strike three, ending the game.

With the victory, Ricks earned the right to an NJCAA district playoff against JC powerhouse Central Arizona. The game would be played in Cooledge, Arizona. Cooledge is between Phoenix and Tuscon. After a long drive and a night's rest, bus drivers Sven Otteson and Neal Christensen loaded the team up to drive to the Central Arizona campus for practice, but where was the campus? It wasn't in Cooledge, but northeast of the town. "Just head north, go over the freeway and turn right; you'll find it easy," was the advice of a local. Right! After wandering through the desert for some time, we finally found the CACC campus tucked behind a butte in the middle of nowhere. The next day we drove back to the campus for the game. As we arrived at the CACC ball park, people were setting up for the game. Part of the set-up included removing a rattlesnake from under the tree where tickets would be sold.

The Lady Vikings played hard, but were no match for Central and the 107 degree heat that weekend. There would be no trip to the national finals this year. So on Saturday afternoon, in that same 107 degree heat, we headed home. Only miles from the school, the air conditioning failed on the bus, and it was soon 110 degrees inside. Sven and Neal stopped at a Phoenix mall and parked the bus under a sickly tree, the only shade available. About 5 PM, we were back on the bus heading north, intending to drive all night to avoid the heat and be home Sunday mid-day. The bus

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had other ideas. Not only did the air conditioning continue to fail, but about every three miles the engine overheated, shut down, and coasted us to a stop. After several minutes, the engine cooled, started up again, and we were on our way, only to coast to a stop just a few miles down the road. Seven hours later, we were only in Flagstaff where we spent the night and continued our memorable trip home the next day in much the same fashion.

MISSIONARIES

The 1998 men's and women's basketball teams won their respective region championships, earning the right to play in the NJCAA championships in Kansas. The girls boarded an airplane in Salt Lake with missionary work on their minds. Six copies of the *Book of Mormon* were given away during the flight. Upon arriving in Kansas, the girls participated in a missionary fireside. They picked up more copies of the *Book of Mormon* from the local missionaries and continued to give them away during the entire trip. The total number placed was close to twenty. The men were only slightly out-done by the women's team. When some girls approached a few members of our men's team, the conversation, which began as flirting, turned to the Church, and more copies of the *Book of Mormon* were placed.

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On a cold night in Bismark, North Dakota, Bob Christensen's wrestling team was getting ready to compete in the national finals. Shane Wasden's parents arrived with a special letter for Shane. The entire team gathered in Shane's hotel room and looked on as he opened his mission call to serve in Korea. Shane went on to earn All America honors before and after his mission.

In 1999 Ricks was invited to play football against Kemper Military School in Missouri. The Kemper coach was not a member of the Church but was familiar with its history, and he suggested that the game be played in Independence. Local church authorities used the game to generate publicity about the Church. A fireside was held featuring members of the football team. Many members from the area came to the game, held at a high school field just a mile or two from the Independence Visitor's Center. When the game concluded, players hurried to the locker room to shower, change into street clothes, and travel by vans to the Liberty Jail. Inside the Visitor's Center, an abbreviated presentation was given as the team looked at the Liberty Jail exhibit. As the sister missionary concluded her presentation, the Spirit that filled the room was overwhelming. The players began to sing, "Praise To The Man." The silence following the hymn was intense but short lived. The players began to sing again, this time, "We Thank Thee, O God, For a Prophet."



Ernie Riedelbach—KBYI Radio

AN UNUSUAL POST-GAME GATHERING

It was Saturday, October 28, 1995. Ricks College had just beaten Phoenix College in football at Viking Stadium. I had broadcast the game on KRIC-FM. As I wrapped up the post-game show, one of the Ricks team captains came into the broadcast booth, took my arm, and hurriedly escorted me to the Viking locker room where the entire team was assembled in a huge circle. (There were usually upwards of 60 or 70 players on the team plus the coaches.) They let me in the circle and all joined hands as one of the captains offered a prayer that I would have successful surgery the following Monday to eliminate a cancerous tumor. Here were 60 or 70 of the biggest, toughest men you'll ever see, humbling themselves in a soft, calming prayer for my well-being, and then after the prayer coming up, shaking my hand, giving me a hug and wishing me well in my first-ever experience with a serious medical procedure. It was one of the most touching moments in my life. The surgery was successful.

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A CIRCLE OF PRIESTHOOD POWER

The evening of February 6, 1998, Ricks had just beaten Snow College in men's basketball in Ephraim, Utah. Ricky Bower was a starter on the Viking team and had recently received his mission call. His brother Greg was also on the team, and his brother Danny, who had been on the team, was playing for BYU in Provo, but had an off night and had come to see our game, along with their step-father. It was the only time they could all be together for some time, so after the game the entire team, coaches, and support personnel gathered in a utility room of the Snow College gym, and with Kendall Grant officiating (he was women's assistant basketball coach and Ricky's campus bishop), Ricky was ordained an Elder. With the women's basketball team looking on, along with Ricky's mother and other family members, an oblong circle was formed by all the Melchizidek Priesthood holders present, which was most of the men's basketball team, 20 or more men in all, Ricky was ordained. It was a very spiritual and emotional moment, transforming from intense basketball competition to humble spirituality.

THE SPIRIT AND THE BODY

There are many other spiritual and athletic special memories associated with Ricks College sports over the years, such as a young woman winning a national track competition with the aid of "her special angel," a girl then

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deceased who had been the runner's pen-pal while suffering her terminal illness. There was a football player in Texas, a high school All-American and heavily recruited by major colleges. He'd never heard of Ricks, but was talked into coming for a visit by the mother of one of the Ricks coaches. His visit happened to include a Sunday, and this big, tough athlete was touched by the Spirit he felt here and reversed his plans to attend a major university with a big time football program. He also had no plans to go on a mission prior to coming to Ricks, but that changed too. He won All-American honors at Ricks, went on to play football and graduate from BYU after his mission, and now works to help straighten out youth who are in trouble with the law.

For the pure exultation of a totally unexpected but desperately hoped-for ending, there was the miracle pass and slam-dunk by 5 foot 11 inch Rod Dixon with two seconds left that won the basketball game between Ricks and CSI. There was the 3-point shot by Ricky Bower with no time left that won the Regional Basketball Tournament and sent the men's team to the National Tournament for the first time in many years. There was the 43-yard "Hail Mary" pass from Hoge to Rydalch with no time left on the clock to come from behind and beat number-one-in-the-nation Dixie in St. George. Sports fans will remember these for a long time. Athletes and others in the athletic programs will also remember how we grew in spirit, individually and together.



Val Carpenter—Athletics

BEING ON TRACK

In 1998 the track team was at nationals. In the pentathlon Shania Nixon fell down on the first race, the 100 meters, but got up to finish. Her mom came running up to her wanting to know if she was alright, gave her a big hug, and said how much she loved her and to keep trying hard. Not only did she keep going and trying hard but she went on to place second or third nationally.

During that same meet Jayson Williams, who was expected to make a new record in the decathlon, was doing just that until he came to the pole vault. He had been vaulting extremely well all week and decided to pass until the 12 foot mark. Unfortunately he "no-heighted" the pole vault and did not receive any points in that event. I saw a very dejected individual similar to Shania's situation. His father, coach, teammates, and others rallied around him, encouraging him and trying to lift his spirits. The other competitors thought they had a chance to become national champion. Jayson rose from the misfortune more determined than ever to place his best time in the 400 meters and capture the decathlon. He

did not set a meet record, but what a great feat to win the national title while getting points in only nine of the ten events.

In that same national meet, I went up to the press box to get the final results. The meet coordinator pulled me aside and said how great it was to have Ricks College at the meet. He said he could always tell a Ricks athlete, not by their uniform but by their actions. President Bednar would always say to the athletes before they departed, “Let His image show in your countenance.”

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MISSIONARY CHAMPIONS

Another great moment was the year the basketball team won the regional championship. They all pulled together as a team, but the amazing thing was that during all of this six of the young men received mission calls. They were more excited about their mission calls, where they were going, where their teammates were going, than getting ready to go to nationals. Again representing the Lord was most important to them. This past year they came back as alumni for a basketball tournament. They had all stayed close friends and faithful to their standards. The student body and community felt a great bond again with a great group of young men.

The 2001 baseball team played well during the season and qualified to go to the regional tournament in St. George. Those who held temple recommends went to a session at the temple. The basketball team had done the same thing. Many of the athletes were freshmen and just getting their mission calls. Again, these young men were more excited about their calls and where their teammates had been called to than about the tournament. Most of these young men have been out just about a year now. As I talk to their parents, they are all having great and wonderful experiences.

ATHLETIC BLESSINGS

When Peni’s mother passed away, his football teammates had a special fast and prayer for him and his family. When one of the baseball players, Casey Hill, was hit in the face by a deflected throw to second base, breaking his nose, the players took him into the dugout and two holding the priesthood administered to him. Something similar happened with the basketball team as one of the players, Sean Kelley, thought he had broken his leg. Two of the players took him to the locker room and administered to him.

The special thing I remember about working with the young men in the locker-room is how they treated each other with respect. You always had young men just coming home from missions and wanting to tell you about their mission experience, or you had the young men who just

received their call and were excited to tell you where they were going. They wanted to share their concerns about their futures in athletics and life, and in some instances about spouses and children. Every year we had a least one young man join the Church because of the example of the other young men. One year we had five baptisms.



Nate Yearsley—Department of Health Science

YEARS OF MAKING MEMORIES

Over the past 30-plus years that I've been associated with athletics at Ricks College, there are numerous experiences that I've been privileged to share with many of the athletes. I've seen them heart-broken because of an injury that they felt might end their season, and I've seen their joy when they recovered and were able to continue in their sport. I've seen them make all-American status both as athletes and academically.

One young athlete of a different faith came to Ricks from Maryland. During football camp in August he was informed that his father had died from a heart attack. We helped him make emergency preparations to return home for his father's funeral. We were able to find a donor who paid for his trip. Mike returned and played wide receiver for two years. Before graduation he was baptized. When I asked about his conversion, he simply stated, "This is the first time I've ever been with a people who really care and who actually practice what they preach." Mike's association with strong LDS teammates and those in the athletic program softened his heart and opened it to the whispering of the Holy Spirit. Thank the Lord for the influence of these young athletes.

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I'LL GO WHERE YOU WANT ME TO GO, DEAR LORD

I've seen a young LDS athlete who wasn't convinced of his need to fulfill a mission. Blair came from a strong LDS family but had some personal questions to resolve. While he was in the training room, he and I and several student trainers talked about the gospel. After two years of football and graduation, I was honored to be asked to talk at his mission farewell.

WHO, ME A BISHOP?

I remember a young athlete from Southern California who came to Ricks to play football in the early 1970s. Royce came from a part-member family. They were inactive and Royce was not a member. We became great friends. After two years of football he joined the Church—went to BYU and played quarterback behind Mark Wilson and Jim McMahon.

After his college football career he came to at least one Ricks College home game each year.

After the announcement that athletics would be dropped at this university, Royce came up to me after one of our home games. He was very tender hearted as he gave me a hug and said, “What will happen to the young men and women who would come here to participate, now that there is no longer an athletic program? I came as a young man not really knowing which way to go in life. The Ricks football program gave me direction. I wasn’t even a member of the Church, and now I’m a bishop.”

MEDIC ALERT

A football player came to camp in August overweight and out of condition. During the first three days of practice, especially in the morning, he would present a flushed face, rapid pulse, and difficulty in breathing. As long as we kept him on the field these symptoms continued. When we took him to the training room he would gradually improve. However, on the third morning his condition became worse. He stopped breathing and we could detect no pulse. CPR was started, and fortunately he was revived. Later, as he was further evaluated, we learned that Lynn had not disclosed that he had serious allergies. On the chart of 25 antigens he was allergic to 22. He was not able to continue athletics because of his high risk of adverse reaction.

SALMONELLA SALAD (1985)

One of the most unforgettable experiences, and least desirable, was when over half of the football team and staff contracted salmonella food poisoning on a road trip to Yuma, Arizona. On Friday evening we ate at a chain restaurant in Yuma. The next morning, game-day, around 6 AM, I received a phone call from an offensive lineman named Waters. He complained of an upset stomach and diarrhea. As soon as I attended to him the phone started ringing off the hook with similar complaints. Soon I realized I had the same symptoms. Most of the party was sick in bed and missed the game. There were only around 20 or so players who showed up for the game. Somehow they won. On the way out of town we stopped at the hospital where we were given IV’s and then sent back to the motel. Half of the team returned to Rexburg that night, and the other half stayed in Yuma. The physician at the hospital stated that if we had taken the whole team back at the same time some would have died from dehydration. It took over three months for most of us to get our gastrointestinal tracts back to normal. I still can’t face a restaurant in that chain.

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REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY

I have been on hundreds of road trips with athletic teams. Almost without exception, the group has been complimented on their behavior and appearance. They have given the Church a very positive image.

Some of the most spiritual meetings I've attended were with the athletic teams. This year on the way back from Odessa, Texas, with the track team returning from the National Jr. College track meet, I was helping to load the vans to go to the airport at around 5:30 AM. Coach Stutz approached me and said, "You're the presiding High Priest, so will you organize and conduct sacrament meeting for us when we get to Layton?" I told him I would. But later I realized there was a problem. The team was leaving at three different times. I was in the early group and wouldn't see anyone until we were all in the airport at Salt Lake City. While waiting for our luggage to arrive, I was running around asking members of the track team to offer prayers, conduct the music, play the piano, prepare and bless and pass the sacrament, and give talks. They only had about 35-40 minutes to prepare. This turned out to be one of the most spiritual and motivational sacrament meetings I've conducted.

SAYING GOOD-BYE IS NEVER EASY

At the end of this year's athletic season, there were many tears shed by our teams and fans, and also by our competitors.

At the end of this year's athletic season, there were many tears shed by our teams and fans, and also by our competitors. They all carried a common thread. Several of the athletic trainers from the Arizona schools gave me a hug and said, "I'm going to miss you, my friend. I've always looked forward to being on the field with you. Now we'll have no standard to look up to. Your teams showed that you can be great athletes and ideal citizens as well."

I am saddened with the loss of athletics at this University. But I am forever grateful for the testimony building and cherished memories. Thanks to the many athletes who spoke at sacrament meetings and firesides in my home ward while I was a bishop, many of our youth were motivated to go on missions.

The athletic program of Ricks College is gone. It will forever be a cherished memory. It has been a great missionary tool, an honorable ambassador for the Lord. It has been a powerful influence for good both on and off the field. Even though we don't understand the reasons for losing this powerful tool for good, we with sad hearts accept the decision and are now going forward, stepping into the dark with faith in the future. ☹