

Where Are They Now: Bob Tate

Former coach still close to players after 50 years

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Bob Tate was a coaching natural. He led Garfield High School basketball teams to the state championship game in each of his first two seasons, losing and winning in that order.

He kept this job for only six years, his magnetic leadership skills providing him with fast-track opportunities to become a school administrator, eventually principal at Cleveland and Mercer Island. Fifty years ago, Tate reluctantly walked away from the coaching sideline, but to this day he has never abandoned his players.

He doesn't recall his Garfield win-loss record (it was 66-21), but he can rattle off the following statistics: He coached 54 players, and 50 attended college or junior college, 39 played basketball at those levels, 35 graduated, 17 received master's degrees and 11 earned doctorates. Everyone should be so lucky to By DAN have someone such as Tate as his coach, which is a lifetime deal. "I know where all the kids I coached are except one," he said. "We keep in touch."

Tate, 82, could relate to his basketball players because he fully understood their successes and failures, experiencing them firsthand. Growing up in Portland, he was a three-sport standout at Franklin High School; in one remarkable stretch sharing in 56 consecutive victories collectively for his football, basketball and baseball teams. With World War II in motion, Tate played one season of basketball for Willamette, serving as captain and leading the team in scoring.

Navy obligations brought him to Washington, where he was a guard who hardly stirred from the bench for Huskies coaches Hec Edmundson and Art McLarney. Tate didn't exactly know what the problem was at the time, but he had Raynaud's disease, a condition that causes blood to constrict in the extremities in cold conditions.

"In those days the pavilion was all windows on the south side, hundreds of windows, and most of them were broken out, and it was like playing outside," he said. "My fingers would become white and useless. Everybody's got a reason they didn't make it. I think I would have done better without that problem."

Tate was a much more effective athlete for the Huskies baseball team. In warmer spring temperatures, he was an infielder who batted .363 and .333 and won multiple divisional and coast honors, while enjoying a career that would land him a spot on the UW all-century team.

He briefly played pro baseball in Pittsburg, Calif., drawing raves while managed by Vince DiMaggio, brother of the Hall of Famer. The Oakland Oaks asked Tate to replace Billy Martin, who was called up to the big leagues. He

passed on a baseball career when Garfield offered him teaching and assistant coaching jobs.

"Vince DiMaggio said, 'Tater, right now you're a better second baseman than most of the players in the major league, but you might not like it. You can be there in two years,' " Tate recalled. "He said there aren't many college graduates playing big league baseball."

In his first season as varsity basketball coach, Tate coaxed Garfield into the 1954 state final, losing 46-42 to city rival Franklin. A year later, he had the Bulldogs back in the title game, and they beat O'Dea, 46-38. His teams made four state tournament appearances, winning 10 of 14 postseason games.

Ahead of his time, he was comfortable coaching a multiracial team and has been credited as the driving force behind the integration of the UW basketball program. He lobbied hard for Huskies coach Tippy Dye to use guard Dick Crews, an African-American and one of Tate's former Garfield players.

"I said, 'Tippy, you're going to keep him. He's a great player and a great kid,' " Tate recalled. "Tippy said, 'I've never coached a black kid, and I'm getting pressure not to keep a black.' He listened to me and he did keep him. From that day on, he thanked me."

A Clyde Hill resident, Tate and his second wife, Marty, have six children among them. He's a retired military officer, formerly commander of the Naval Air Station Whidbey Island reserves. He maintains UW basketball season tickets, keeping a close eye on the current team.

Life has been challenging at times. Nine years ago, after playing for a senior tennis team that competed nationally, Tate suffered a heart attack and had a near-death experience. In 2005, he and his wife were out for a walk on Christmas Eve when he collapsed with another cardiac episode and had another close brush, saved only because an off-duty firefighter and nurse were close by.

Tate has a strong will to live, which is the same way he treated coaching. He can't leave this world just yet.

After all, who would keep tabs on all of those Garfield players?