

# Legendary South Bend coach Don Koplitz dead at 90

- [RICK ANDERSON](#) Thu Mar 29th, 2018 3:40pm



**SOUTH BEND**— Don Koplitz, the gentlemanly former South Bend High School principal and coach who helped turn the Indians into a perennial state boys basketball contender, died Thursday morning after a battle with cancer. He was 90.

Koplitz and his wife Bertha, a pioneer coach of girls sports at South Bend, are both members of the state coaches association Hall of Fame. The South Bend gym was renamed in their honor — Don and Bertha Koplitz Fieldhouse — in 1996.

Funeral arrangements are pending. South Bend athletic director Tom Sanchez said Thursday that the gym would likely be the site of some type of future memorial service.

Don Koplitz won 328 games during his basketball coaching career and compiled a 242-121 record during 14 seasons at South Bend. His South Bend teams never failed to qualify for district and made seven state tournament appearances, as both a Class A and B school.

According to the Washington Interscholastic Basketball Coaches Association, he reached the 300-victory level faster than any varsity coach in state history.

In many respects, however, he was the antithesis of the stereotypical coach. Although a stickler for fundamentals, he remained composed on the bench and virtually never yelled at players or officials.

“I don’t remember him in any setting raising his voice,” said former South Bend superintendent Mike Morris, the point guard on Koplitz’s first Tribe basketball team.

“Wherever and whenever you were around him, you had respect for him. That was his aura,” agreed Gary Wilson, another former player who is now South Bend’s technical and maintenance director and the school’s high school girls basketball coach. “It was more than just being a basketball coach. It was the way he presented himself.”

Morris recalled Koplitz calling aside players during practices for 5-minute one-on-one conversations that he said could focus on anything from basketball philosophy to match-ups against South Bend’s next opponent.

A native of Marysville, Koplitz was hired as South Bend’s principal in 1962 after serving as principal and basketball coach at tiny (and now-defunct) Skykomish High School. He took over as boys basketball coach in 1971.

His first South Bend team won its first 23 games, won the West Central 1A League championship against such larger schools as Montesano and Raymond, and went on to place eighth at state.

Four years later, the Indians came even closer to a state championship. They went unbeaten in their first 26 games, captured league and district titles and advanced to the state Class A semifinals before a heartbreaking one-point loss to Royal ended their championship dreams. South Bend wound up placing third at state that year.

Koplitz’s 1979 team won the district Class B championship.

His teams generally featured at least one outstanding outside shooter — all-stater Tim Taylor, Morris, Mark Madison and Koplitz’s sons Steve and Brent among them. But although his first South Bend club scored more than 90 points on three occasions, Koplitz’s squads remained disciplined.

“He was very diligent in the ways he explained the fundamentals and how he wanted to incorporate them into the game,” Wilson remembered. “If you passed the ball behind your back, you went to the bench.”

“We pressed and fast broke, but if there wasn’t a layup coming out of a fast break, we ran set plays,” Morris noted. “It was old-school basketball, much of which you don’t see today.”

Defense, however, was probably the trademark of Koplitz-coached teams. Under his tutelage, the Indians were among the state’s first prep teams to successfully utilize a match-up zone.

Koplitz retired as the high school principal in 1982. Although an administrator throughout his South Bend tenure, he willingly filled in as a substitute teacher and even as a school bus driver.

“He was a fantastic math teacher,” Morris said. “We were excited when our (normal) math teacher wasn’t there.”

Koplitz continued as the boys basketball coach through 1985. Despite a winning record that left his team one win shy of another state appearance that year, his coaching contract was not renewed and he never returned to the bench.

He also coached baseball, both at the high school and summer youth levels, for several years. His Willapa Harbor team qualified for the State Senior Babe Ruth Baseball Tournament in the early 1970s.

Along with his wife, he was a staple at Willapa Harbor basketball and volleyball games and district tournaments, frequently pitching in as a volunteer at district tournaments until his recent illness.

“He and Mrs. K had complete dedication to school and kids,” Morris summed up. “From my perspective, growing up watching that, I thought that’s what everybody did.”