

Les Habegger

Les Habegger, built Seattle Pacific into a regional men's basketball power during a two-decade tenure at the school. Habegger, who started at then-Seattle Pacific College as an assistant to Ken Foreman in 1956, took over as head coach the following season when Foreman left to begin work on his doctorate (and eventually went on to become an enormously successful track and field coach). By the time Habegger stepped down in 1974, he had a record of 267-170. That win total is still more than any other men's basketball coach in school history, and included three seasons of 20 or more victories.

"The way he approached coaching was with a passion that was pretty much unmatched in those days," said Don DeHart, who played for Habegger and the Falcons from 1970-74. "He wanted to prepare his players not just for the next game, but for life. That was a long way from his initial season at the helm in 1957-58, when he was 33 years old and just one year out of college. That team went 6-20.

Habegger's Falcons played in six NCAA tournaments, and his 1965 squad went all the way to the Elite Eight. Just a few months later, Seattle Pacific opened the 1965-66 season with an 85-83 upset of Division I Seattle University in the Seattle Center Coliseum. The most important thing I learned that first year is losing is no fun," he said during a 2014 interview "There weren't many basketball players here at the time, so I began to do some recruiting, and we went from there."

Habegger was inducted into the Falcon Hall of Fame in 2004. A pair of his players – Howard Heppner and Jim Ballard – also are in the Hall, as is John Glancy, who played three years for Habegger, also starred in track, and went on to work 46 years in various capacities at SPU before retiring last month. "We always had confidence and respected him for his ability as a coach," Glancy said. "We knew that he could devise a plan to make us win, and he would get the most out of his players. We did the best when we did it his way."

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

After more than 20 years at the school, Habegger went across town to join the Seattle SuperSonics in 1977 as the assistant to newly hired head coach Bob Hopkins. That combination lasted just 22 games, as Hopkins was fired after the Sonics got off to a 5-17 start. Lenny Wilkens took over as head coach, and kept Habegger as his assistant. Together, they guided Seattle into back-to-back NBA Finals against the Washington Bullets, losing in seven games in 1978, but winning in five the following year.

"When the opportunity came and I got that job, I found out that I can coach at that level, even though I was an assistant," said Habegger, who previously had done some scouting for the Sonics. "Lenny was a very good guy to work with. He allowed me to do a lot of things. Some of the offense that we ran at Seattle Pacific, I put in with the Sonics. We ran it, we had some success, and it was just verification that I can coach at that level." Habegger later won three championship coaching in the pro league in Germany.

In addition to being in the Falcon Hall of Fame, the native of Berne, Ind., was inducted into that state's Basketball Hall of Fame in 2014. That put Habegger into the same shrine as hoops luminaries as Larry Bird, who starred at Indiana State before going on to win multiple NBA titles with the Boston Celtics, and former Indiana University coach Bob Knight. "Growing up in Indiana, we think basketball was invented by us," said Habegger, the youngest of 10 children in his family.

INTRIGUED BY COACHING

Habegger served as a U.S. Army medic in Europe during World War II. After being discharged from the military, he attended Northwestern College in Minneapolis for two years, transferred to Wheaton College in Illinois to complete his undergraduate work, then enrolled in grad school

at the University of Minnesota. While pursuing his master's, he served as an assistant coach at College. It was then and there that he began to think about getting into coaching as a career. "At that time, I thought I wanted to be involved in working with young men and helping them develop," he said. "And I wanted to do that in the framework of a Christian college."

Habegger wrote letters to several Christian schools around the country and received a response from Seattle Pacific president C. Hoyt Watson. He ultimately was offered the job as Foreman's assistant ahead of the 1956-57 season. Upon stepping up to the head coaching job in 1957, Habegger began to implement his own style. For him, it was all about team. "You play together, you work together, and no one individual is good enough to carry the load," he said. "That was really the impetus to my success. If anyone didn't want to play a team game, he didn't stay very long."

Glancy said Habegger was way more than just a coach. "I've heard some ballplayers say he changed their lives in a positive way, not only on the basketball court or in life, but even in developing their faith," he said. "He had an influence that went beyond the basketball court. "Added DeHart, "I remember I was on a flight to the West Coast one time, and North Carolina was on that flight, and I sat next to (legendary coach) Dean Smith. He said, 'Oh yeah, Seattle Pacific – that's Les Habegger.' He was very well respected by players and coaches all around. "He was just an amazing man."