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# Colleagues praise Oldham's enduring legacy on WKU's hill

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JOHN OLDHAM

Gary West has 100 stories about the late, great Western Kentucky University basketball coach John Oldham – who led the team in 1971 to the Final Four for its first and only time in history and won “Coach of the Year” in the Ohio Valley Conference four times. Oldham died last month at the age of 97.

## MORE INFORMATION



Hilltopper legend John Oldham dies at 97

There was the time at the Peachtree Classic in Atlanta when Oldham helped show someone who turned out to be CNN founder Ted Turner where the bathroom was in the Omni International Hotel – a hotel Turner owned at the time.

Oldham's legacy felt far beyond the court

There’s also the pair’s first encounter with a pet ferret out for a walk on a leash with its owner when Oldham

and West made a stop on their way to a Sun Belt Conference meeting in South Carolina.

“John says ‘What do you got there? Sir, what do you got there?’ And the guy says ‘I’ve got a ferret.’ Well, I’ve got to be honest with you, I’d never heard of a ferret,” said West, then the head of the Hilltopper 100 Club, now called the Hilltopper Athletic Foundation, WKU Athletics’ official fundraising arm.

The two men returned to the car, where their wives were sitting in the back seat, West said. Oldham’s wife, Bobbie Jean Oldham, overheard the two talking about the encounter.

“She was from Harlan (County),” West noted. “In her Harlan drawl ... She leaned up between the seats, and she says ‘Boys, I can tell you one thing: If you believe that guy had a parrot, you’re crazy.’ ”

Equally as indelible as all the memories the two friends shared was the kind of leader Oldham was along the way, West said, remembering how Oldham lifted his

colleagues up, how he pushed them into the limelight. West likens him to the good-natured Sheriff Andy Taylor of sleepy Mayberry and Andy Griffith Show fame.

“He did everything with not a lot of drama, with ease. He let everybody else get the credit,” West said. “He was so comfortable within himself that he was an amazing guy to work for.”

West recalled Oldham’s fear of flying, born out of an experience in the Navy when Oldham’s plane skidded off the runway leaving him unharmed but rattled. That meant they drove across the South for Sun Belt Conference meetings and events, West said.

“The Bible tells you not to fly,” West recalls Oldham telling him once. “I said ‘It does?’ John had a great sense of humor. He says ‘Yes, it says in there: Lo, I am with you always.’”

Retired WKU President Gary Ransdell said Oldham was a towering figure in three major chapters of his life – throughout Ransdell’s experience as a WKU undergraduate,

after Ransdell graduated in 1973 and took a job at the university while Oldham was athletic director and again after Ransdell returned to WKU to become its president in 1997. Post-retirement, Ransdell said that's when he was able to form a deep friendship with Oldham.

“I loved listening to him not only as a former athlete, coach and administrator but as someone who was so deeply ingrained in our history,” Ransdell said, describing Oldham as an “absolute gentleman.”

“I think what John Oldham did was follow Ed Diddle with class and style,” Ransdell said, calling that a tall order after coaching at Tennessee Tech University. “To come back home and succeed at Diddle must have been exhilarating and a bit daunting, and I admire the way he did that so successfully and wrote his own chapter in our university's history book.”

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