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WKU athletics

Oldham's legacy felt far beyond the court

Former players, coaches and friends remember the Western Kentucky legend

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WKU Athletics

Clarence Glover remembers walking up the stairs of the auxiliary gym to the main floor at E.A. Diddle Arena, a big deal for a freshman at Western Kentucky University in the 1960s.

The first-year players weren't allowed to play varsity then, but he was called upon to practice against the varsity team as it prepared for Ohio Valley Conference play. Glover says, at that point, he was just pleased to be there getting an education, but that day he was assigned the duty of guarding Wayne Chapman, who finished his career as a Hilltopper averaging 16.4 points per game and is currently 25th on the program's all-time scoring list.

Chapman and Greg Smith were the stars on the team in Glover's eyes, and he was glued to the former that day, not allowing him his usual production. It frustrated Chapman, so much that he eventual turned and shoved Glover to the floor.

"So I'm there. Wayne was a senior. I was a freshman. We were peons because we didn't even get to carry the varsity shoes, much less be on the same floor with them," Glover said. "I'm sitting there and I'm thinking, 'I just made the star player angry.' Coach (John) Oldham is standing there and I'm thinking, 'I'm going to lose my scholarship. I made Wayne mad.' "

Except that wasn't what happened next.

Oldham, instead, "chewed up one side of Wayne and down the other," told him to help Glover up, apologize to him, and then thank him, because nobody in the OVC was going to guard him that tightly, and if he could withstand that, he'd be great when the team played real games.

Glover says he and Chapman have laughed about the incident since its occurrence as they got older and closer, but that moment stands out to the then-freshman.

It showed him the integrity Oldham had, and the coach – and person – he'd get to know over the next five decades.

The court where it happened is now named after Oldham, who died Monday at age 97, but for those who knew him best, his legacy lives well beyond that or any mention in the record books.

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“Listen, John Oldham and I – I’m probably the only guy that’s gone that far back with him,” 98-year-old Lee “Mr. Western” Robertson says into the phone Tuesday, just over a day after Oldham’s death and less than 24 hours before the Hilltoppers were scheduled to tip off the 2020-21 season against Northern Iowa in Sioux Falls, S.D.

Robertson says he and Oldham became friends when they were at WKU after both served in the military during World War II, but his first impression of Oldham came well before. Robertson went to high school in Calhoun and Oldham at nearby Hartford, where Oldham starred on the basketball court and earned All-State honors.

“You didn’t have to be an expert in basketball to know that you were watching a super player, because he was bigger than most of the people and he knew how to play, had big ol’ hands, and you could see it that this guy was an exceptional basketball player, and that was a special senior in high school when he was a Hartford Mustang,” Robertson recalls.

That was just the beginning of his athletic career. Oldham came to WKU in 1942 to play for E.A. Diddle, before his three years of military service. He returned to The Hill in 1946, and finished his playing career with 1,006 points, helping WKU to three NIT appearances, four conference championships and 102 wins along the way. He was named an All-American by the United Press International and the Associated Press as a senior, when he averaged 11 points per game, and was named to the very first All-OVC Team. In 2018, he was named to WKU’s All-Century Team.

After college, he went on to play two seasons for the NBA’s Fort Wayne (now Detroit) Pistons, purchasing a Plymouth car from his brother with his signing bonus, according to Robertson. He returned to Bowling Green to coach at College High School, moved on to take the head coaching position at Tennessee Tech, and then once again returned to WKU in 1964 to take over as the basketball team’s head coach for the retiring Diddle.

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Oldham went 18-9 in his first of seven seasons, and 25-3 in his next, finishing 10th in the final AP poll. In his third, the Hilltoppers finished 6th in the AP poll with a 23-3 record.

“He never showed a lot of emotion,” said Clem Haskins, the leading scorer each of those three seasons who later served as the program’s head coach for six seasons from 1980-86. “He was always so calm, cool, collected and he never, never – well, I was a nut on the bench, I guess – and he didn’t show that kind of expression. He was always calm and cool and very direct, and someone that, when he spoke, you knew that he knew what he was talking about.”

Haskins finished with 1,680 career points and was one of the three consensus All-Americans in WKU history, but credits Oldham with getting the team to play his style. Oldham was named OVC Coach of the Year in 1966, and Haskins says his class was one of the two best he coached.

“He meant so much for that community because he was very firm, very direct, but he could put his arms around you and make you think you were the best player, the greatest individual in the world,” Haskins said. “He could bring that out of you and make you feel like that because he was very honest, very sincere, in his approach.”

Haskins says Oldham always kept the team grounded, too, recalling that, when the team was on the road Sunday for games, he’d take the players to church. One instance, in Haskins’ sophomore season, the team had beaten Fordham 57-53 in the NIT at Madison Square Garden. It was a Saturday game, and the team didn’t play again until Tuesday, so they listened to Norman Vincent Peale at church the next day.

Oldham’s coaching success continued, with his most successful season – his last coaching and Glover’s senior year – filled with a team of Kentucky-born superstars still to come, but he didn’t let the success change the way he operated.

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In that final year – 1970-71 – the team played South Carolina on Dec. 30 in the ECAC Holiday Festival at Madison Square Garden and lost 86-84. WKU was scheduled to play at East Tennessee on Jan. 2, and would fly directly there. Glover says Oldham didn't like flying, so he took a train back to Bowling Green and was going to drive to the game on his own, and Glover got special permission to fly back to Bowling Green and then ride with the coach.

The two planned to meet at Diddle Arena to drive together, but Oldham was late for the meeting. When he finally arrived, they left for Tennessee.

"We were driving and driving and driving and driving, and he looks at his watch and says, 'We're not going to make it in time for practice.' I said, 'OK.' And he said, 'Well, you know what that means?' And I said 'No.' He said, 'If a player misses practice, if they're a starter, they can't start.' I looked at him and said, 'I was there on time. You're the reason we're late.' He said, 'Yes, but you're the player,' " Glover said. "I said, 'OK, it seems only fair to me that if we're both late and if I can't start the game as a starter, then you shouldn't start the game as head coach.'

"He drove a little bit, and after a little bit of silence, he said, 'OK. No one will know but me and you. We'll do everything like we always do. You won't start the game and I'll let (Wallace) Buck (Snydor) and Jim (Richards) do the talking during the first huddle, then when you go in the game I'll become the head coach again.' "

Glover said he and Oldham often roomed together on the road to allow space for another player to make the trips, but said their relationship was always player and coach. He didn't burden Glover with issues he was dealing with, including the most significant that season when people were sending him threatening letters and police were checking around his car to make sure it was safe before he left Diddle Arena.

Glover didn't know any of that until he was out of college, but now looks back at halftime of a first-round NCAA Tournament game in South Bend, Ind., with a different perspective.

Earlier that season, an injury created an opening in the starting lineup. Oldham elected to move Rex Bailey into the starting position, creating an all-Black starting five of Bailey, Glover, Jim McDaniels, Jim Rose and Jerry Dunn – something never done at WKU before, and a move seen as unpopular by many at a southern university at the time. Oldham was called into the office of president Dero Downing because a member of the Board of Regents was worried he would start five Black players.

"He received mail, threats on his life, different type of things. Even was called in by one member of the Board of Regents in regard to him going to start five players of color," Glover said. " ... When he was called in, and he offered his resignation because he said that he was not starting players because of the color of their skin, he was starting the players he thought he could win with. He told the university that he would resign, but he would not change."

No resignation was accepted, and WKU went on to reach the Final Four for its first and only time in history.

But Glover goes back to halftime of the first game of the NCAA Tournament, where WKU was down 44-30 to Jacksonville – the team that ended the Hilltoppers' season the year prior.

"Looking back at that, I think about halftime and the weight that was on his shoulders that was needlessly put there because one person wrote, 'You will never be able to win with five black players because they don't have the capacity of intelligence to do so,' " Glover said. "I read those. It was different things, but that was one that weighed on my mind later, that he would have to go back to Bowling Green if we lost that first game.

" ... The other coaches may have known this. We did not. He did not place the burden on us. He kept it upon himself. I think that was the integrity he had as a person, as a human being, that he would shoulder that type of burden."

WKU came back to win 74-72, before beating Kentucky and Ohio State to reach the Final Four, where they lost to Villanova in double overtime. The Hilltoppers returned as winners, though, beating Kansas in the consolation game.

In his seven seasons as head coach, he compiled a 142-40 record, leading WKU to five postseason trips and four conference championships. He was named OVC Coach of the Year in 1969-70 and 1970-71, in addition to the honor in 1965-66. His .780 winning percentage at WKU remains the highest in program history, and his No. 42 jersey hangs in the rafters at Diddle Arena. He was a part of 244 victories and nine conferences championships as a player and coach, and has a combined 82.2 winning percentage.

Oldham has been inducted into the Lions Club Kentucky High School Hall of Fame (1969), Kentucky Athletic Hall of Fame (1986), Ohio Valley Conference Hall of Fame (1989), Kentucky High School Hall of Fame (1990), Tennessee Tech Sports Hall of Fame (1990), WKU Athletic Hall of Fame (1991) and WKU Hall of Distinguished Alumni (2002).

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Todd Stewart most connected with Oldham in a later role.

In addition to sharing a June 22 birthday, the two shared the responsibility of running the WKU athletic department – Stewart currently, and Oldham from 1971-86.

“He had so many experiences at so many different levels, so you could talk to him about anything because he had experienced it himself,” Stewart said. “What really stood out to me was, number one, what a nice man he was. Just what a friendly, courteous, caring, nice guy. He’s one of these people that I can’t imagine anybody having any bad words to say about him.

“He was always so nice, therefore he was fun to be around. I just liked to listen when I was around him. He wasn’t a man of many words. He was so humble, that you almost had to try to pry things out of him because he was so humble and always deferred and never really wanted to take credit for things, but he was so successful in every area.”

Oldham’s work can still be seen around campus today. He conceptualized the Red Towel logo in 1971, and Big Red was created during his tenure as well.

The revival of women’s athletics at WKU occurred during his time with the creation of Title IX, and the football team moved to Division I-AA under his direction. He’s also credited for some of WKU’s best hires, including Paul Sanderford in women’s basketball, Joel Murrie in baseball and Curtiss Long in track and field.

He trusted his coaches to do their jobs – Haskins says the only thing Oldham ever told him about his coaching that needed to change was shortening his practices, which Haskins says only took him about a decade to realize was true.

“I think that people in Bowling Green respected him when he played as a player and they respected him when he coached and became the athletic director because he was a man’s man, and you could take to the bank whatever he said, OK? He wasn’t wishy washy. He would tell you direct and tell you the truth.”

Oldham’s style rolled into the way he ran the department, which led to success. While he was athletics director, WKU won six OVC All-Sports Championships and one Sun Belt Conference All-Sports Championship.

“He was so low-key about how he went about things, but he got things done,” said Paul Just, WKU’s sports information director emeritus and historian, who has worked in WKU athletics for over 50 years.” He was wonderful to work with and work for. His players loved him, and he just did things. He was a people person that was quiet, unassuming, but at the same time was very loyal to his people and his people were very loyal to him.”

Oldham remained a popular figure at the school after his basketball career. Robertson, who worked as the school's alumni affairs director from 1960-1985, in addition to other roles, remembers campus move-in days where staff would help move students into dorms, and how people would bypass him to talk to Oldham. He says Oldham was one of the most popular speakers people asked for at events.

"If you think of all the great people connected to Western – I'm talking about founding president H.H. Cherry, Ed Diddle ... if you asked them to name the top three people that are so important to Western, I think John would be named on all of them."

It went well beyond Bowling Green, too.

Robertson remembers a trip to Orlando, Fla., where he and Oldham saw Arnold Palmer at a tournament. Oldham got Robertson to approach him – Robertson recalled instances of meeting Yogi Berra and Sam Snead in Atlanta where Oldham made him do the introductions – and the group talked.

"I went out there and stuck my hand out and told him it was Johnny Oldham here with me, our athletic director, and he shook hands with us and I told him, 'We're going to play your golf course tomorrow.' He said, 'Well, good. You'll be my guests and your foursome, because of your athletic director here,' " Robertson said. "He knew about Johnny Oldham, Arnold Palmer did. We enjoyed that and did it at the expense of ol' Arnold Palmer."

In 2012, shortly after Stewart took over as athletics director, the school gave Oldham one more mark to leave when it decided to name the floor at Diddle Arena "John Oldham Court." On Dec. 27, 2012, he filled in the final stripe in his name.

"He was very humble. I remember at first he was a little reluctant saying 'You don't have to do that and that's not necessary,' and we really wanted to do that. It turned out to be, I think, a really special night for him. His entire family was there and he was recognized during a basketball game," Stewart said. " ... He actually did that himself and kind of finished it up. It's stood the test of time and it always will – it'll always be on the court."

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Robertson picked up Oldham and took him to visit his hometown several times over the last few years. He called him a “cheap date,” because all he wanted was a strawberry milkshake.

During the last visit, they went to look at old artifacts and Ohio County memorabilia, and much of it had to do with Oldham.

On the way back, the two stopped at the welcome to Hartford sign that reads “Home of 2000 happy people & a few soreheads.” There was more to the reason for stopping, however.

“Right next to that sign was a great big nice sign, ‘The home of Johnny Oldham.’ It says, ‘Player, coach, athletic director, teacher at Western Kentucky University,’ “ Robertson said. “John had never seen it.

“We pulled up there and made some pictures, and John got out and looked that over and didn’t say much else about it because that’s how modest he was. We’ve lost a very valuable man in this town.”{&end}

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MORE INFORMATION



Hilltopper legend John Oldham dies at 97

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