

## Coach John Nelson: Champion of Fulton County

In the golden age of Hoosier basketball, there were many memorable figures that played out David and Goliath moments on the court. Sometimes the smaller schools, like David, would triumph, but most times the big schools would win. Whatever the outcome, the stories of the games and the tales of great coaches and players still resonate in the Hoosier psyche and inspire us today.

One such inspiration from the heyday of Hoosier hysteria was Coach John Nelson. He remains an inspiration not just because of his own impressive career as a player, or because of his wins as a coach. Nelson inspires us today primarily as a result of his strong sense of civic duty and his determination to serve his community the best he could.

One way Coach Nelson served Fulton County was through his involvement with the Community Foundation. From inception, he served on the board and various committees. During his time with the Community Foundation, he chaired the Lilly Endowment Community Scholarship Committee—a time intensive service during which, he helped select the Fulton County recipients of the prestigious full-tuition scholarships. He also chaired the Mikesell Scholarship Committee, and has been credited with attracting and helping to establish a number of other scholarship funds with the Community Foundation.

One of his five children, Margaret Barrett, remarked that he enjoyed serving the youth of Fulton County through the Community Foundation. “He enjoyed working on the Lilly Scholarship Committee so much,” she said. “He loved the interviews and interacting with the kids.”

His high school sweetheart and wife, Janice, reminisced about how he would spread the applications all over their couch, not having a desk large enough to sort them all on. “He would go over and over them,” she said, “being so careful about the selection.”

She explained that he even came up with a system for the committee to analyze and eliminate candidates for the scholarship. Members of the old committee still remark to Janice about how they miss him.

Nelson, a Fulton County native, graduated from Rochester High. He was inspired by his own coaches and wanted to be a mentor to young people, too. With an athletic scholarship to Valparaiso University, he pursued his education. He went on to receive his master's degree from Ball State University. His coaching career began in Boone County at Dover. He and Janice moved back to Fulton County, to Leiters Ford, where he took on teaching and coaching at Aubbeenaubbee School.



"For nearly 50 years, John Riley Nelson, coach, teacher, friend and community leader, was the embodiment of Aubbeenaubbee Township athletics," wrote Jim Carr in tribute to Nelson. "To all who knew him and his Aubbee Braves, he was Mr. Aubbeenaubbee."

Along with representing his township through the Community Foundation, Nelson also served on the Aubbeenaubbee Township Advisory Board and was very active with the Leiters Ford United Methodist Church and the Fulton County Economic Development Corporation. In later years, he was instrumental in the creation of a new Community Center, and fundraising for the Otis Bowen Scholarship Fund.

Coach Nelson passed away at the age of 73, in 2002, but his memory and sense of civic duty lives on through the John R. Nelson Scholarship Fund. The scholarship provides funds to qualified students in Aubbeenaubbee and Rochester townships.

"I think he'd be very honored," Barrett said of the scholarship. "It means a lot to us (the family). We know all the good Dad did for the school and the community, and this gives a chance for other people to know it, too."

"We treasure everything about him," Janice said. "Anything that keeps his philosophies alive thrills us."