

## A Shared Experience

# Evelyn Habenicht

I met my husband, Merv Habenicht, in High School in Fort Dodge. The words under his senior picture in the yearbook were, “Football is my middle name.” How prophetic! He ultimately played football in high school, Junior College, the Army—every time I met Hayden Fry, he recalled that his Marine team beat Merv’s Army team when they were both in the service—and then in college on scholarship.

His first coaching job was in 1960 at Bettendorf. Merritt Parsons was the head coach and Merv always gave him full credit for his training. He quoted him often and abided by his coaching philosophy with such things as: "There are 3 things that can happen when you pass the ball and 2 of them are bad." Or, "You can't score if you don't have the ball." Merv put an emphasis on defense like no one ever had; he kept stats on tackles and had the newspaper print them along with the completed passes.



One of our defensive coaches, Tom Downs, came up with the plan that if a defensive player scored a touchdown by interception or fumble recovery, he got a steak dinner that week at his house. Such that, Bettendorf teams became known for their fierce defense! We would go for quarter after quarter without being scored upon! The players were intensely trying to not just win the game, but to not let them score! It was a pride thing even after Merv cleared the bench in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half: those second- and third-teamers didn't want to be scored upon either!

When we first played in the finals in the UNI-Dome, after the kids had showered and dressed, Coach John Lavelle took the juniors back into the UNI-Dome into the nearly dark, cavernous field and quietly spoke to them. None of us ever heard what was said. I asked Coach Lavelle to share it with us now, in this intro. Here is what he said: "What I wanted to do was to put it in their mind what we had just experienced and make them believe that they too could experience it the following year if they were going to make the commitment to return. Some of the juniors had played on the field, some of them had not. We walked the field and quietly talked about what playing in the Dome would mean to them as seniors. I guess it was learning how to walk the talk."

Coach Tom Freeman's son, Tommy, later became a computer expert, but before that, he mathematically—by pencil and paper—kept stats on "tendencies." For instance: “On 3rd and short, Clinton 7 out of 10 times runs a (certain) play.” So we called the defense that would stop them. Those kind of things came in handy when for a from 1981-83 we ended up with a free date; while the other conference schools just rested that week, Merv called all over the state looking for a game. We ended up driving up to Madison (WI) two of those three years to play them. They had been state champs in 1980 so this wasn't some patsy team and Merv always said, “You play to the level of your competition.” We ended going 3-0 against them.

Other reasons why we were so successful—and we always hoped that opposing coaches wouldn't catch on—were Merv's “special weapons” like 2-platooning, playing a full JV schedule, and making fanatic fans

out of all the students, parents, little brothes, sisters, bus drivers, and custodians. It's a little known fact that in 40 years at BHS, Merv never wrote a requisition. He didn't have to because those guys loved him!

Merv loved the honors accorded him as much as any man would, but he didn't let it run his life. During the 1991 & '92 seasons, when we were ranked in the top 25 nationally by *USA Today*, a reporter would call our house every Sunday morning for an interview with the coach. However, all he ever got was little ole me!.. and I never had the right answers to his questions. He'd ask me who had the most tackles and how many. I had no idea but the next week I'd be ready with the info—only he didn't want it then. I don't know if I was dealing with the same reporter every week or not. I begged Merv to stay home and answer the calls, but he would just refuse and say it was the only time he got all season to drink coffee with his friends and relax.

One time during the 1987, '88, and '89 seasons I felt especially stupid when I tried to tell a reporter that we were in our third consecutive undefeated season and had won 36 games in a row which was some type of record! The next week he had checked and Waterloo East had that record—55 games in a row from 1955-66. Stupid me, I should have pointed out that their record was in the days before the playoffs and only meant that they had won every conference game for five straight seasons. Bettendorf, on the other hand, had beaten the best teams in the *entire* state for 3 consecutive years! Merv knew, but he wasn't home. Arghhhhhhh!

Merv coached at different levels for 40 years. His varsity winning record of 229-70-1 (76%) is well known. But what I'm most proud of is the influence he had on so many young men's lives. I have repeatedly been told by former players when speaking of Merv, "He was more of a dad to me than my own father. Or, "If it wasn't for him, I never would have finished high school." I know in my heart that Merv never really knew how much he influenced these young men, or at least he didn't give it much thought. What he did just came naturally to him. He loved kids and seemed to always have one with him in his truck, running errands, taking them through the fast food places or bringing them home for me to feed to ensure they had a hot meal. If a kid showed up with raggedy or no football shoes, we took him to get fitted with brand new ones, and paid for it out of our pocket—no big deal! He saw a need and he filled it. Period. Did this help the team? Probably, but it didn't matter. It needed doing.

I was always asking him how many kids he was bringing home for supper so that I'd prepare enough food. His answer was always the same: "It depends on how many hang around the locker room after practice. I'll bring them home then."

After the 50-point mercy rule was adopted in 1992, we were playing Clinton at their place and the score was 36-0 at the half. Merv let Tavian play one more series, then put in the JV to play the rest of the game. After the game, the Clinton athletic director came over to thank Merv for not making them the first team in the state to lose by the mercy rule. Personally, I can't remember Merv ever running up the score. Tavian seldom, if ever, got to play past the first series of the second half; that was also to keep him from getting injured.

With five kids of our own, I was used to cooking lots of food and it was a challenge to fill the bellies of these huge athletes!... but I loved every minute of the up close, getting to know them by their faces (and not their jersey numbers). Speaking of jersey numbers, after the 1981 championship, I mentioned to Merv that our quarterback' jersey had been mended so many times that there wasn't much left of it... could I please just give it to him? Merv talked to Wendell Hill, Bettendorf's AD at the time and he let the kids buy their jerseys for \$5 (instead of handing them down to the sophomore team). A lot of "lost" jerseys

were mysteriously found and paid for, so the school came out ahead and the players got mementos of being the very first state champions of BHS!

There was one very special kid who had many reasons to be angry with the world. He became very special to us both. The first time Merv brought him home I asked him if he'd like a can of pop or something to eat. He just glared at me...no answer. Merv ended up with his "henchman," riding around town everywhere with him: to Bishops for supper with us, running errands to the bank, cleaners or grocery store. The happy ending to this story was when he brought his prom date to the house to meet us, pose for pictures, and then gave me a big hug. He is still a dear friend to me.

One day Merv came home and told me a player had to be excused from practice to drive to Fort Dodge to bury his beloved cat on his grandpa's farm. I suggested maybe one of our daughter's newborn kittens would lessen the loss for the player. Merv agreed. So I showed up at practice, which happened to be before the 1<sup>st</sup> Round of the playoffs that season, with the kitten. During a break, Merv sent the kid up to my car. He held the kitten a little while, fighting the tears in his eyes, then handed it back to me, said thanks, but it was just too soon. Then he hugged me. I think that was the first hug I'd gotten from a sweaty, giant player in full pads, on my tippy toes. I was hooked! This same player, at the end of the season, had a tear in the neck of his jersey. Grumpy ole Merv showed it to him, said it wasn't any good anymore and he might as well keep it. Remember 1981? Merv *knew* how much players liked getting to keep their jerseys!

Tenacity! That describes Merv in one word. He never gave up. The word "no" was a challenge to him. I know in my heart that he "saved" some young men who were headed down the wrong path. They not only gained a father, sometimes a mother figure, but lots of brothers who learned to work together for a common goal. For some of them, football was the first taste of success in their young lives. They learned to be proud of themselves. They had a second "instant" family!

I don't remember how my role of assistant/partner to Merv's coaching started. He loved having me come to practice. That began for two main reasons on my part: one, we never *lost* at practice, so I could relax and enjoy it (I later discovered I had high blood pressure) and I loved seeing him in action. Often he wouldn't acknowledge my presence until I'd start to leave and suddenly I'd hear my name called and "Where you going?" He wanted me to be a part of it all and I loved it. Two: sometimes my duties included a run across the river to pick up special shoulder pads or a larger helmet for a player, or like one time, I hauled a player over to his house in full gear to get a parental signature so the insurance covered him in practice. I also once took a kid to the doctor who had an ulcer. One time I saw our running back staggering around after a hit in practice and I finally honked the horn of my car to get Merv's attention; the player had a concussion and kept repeating himself all the way over to Dr. Edward's office where his dad met us. I also took quite a few players to Palmer College for their less expensive physical when they missed the school's athletic-wide one.

We never had a player miss a game because of bad grades. Merv kept a close eye on all of his players' progress in school. If someone was in trouble, they either got help at school or at our kitchen table until the grades came up. Early in his career, Merv had a kid in 10<sup>th</sup> grade History class who could barely read; he'd had remedial help at U of I to no avail, but Merv taught him to read in History class. He went on to become a teacher/coach. Later, the school provided the help these kids needed. Merv and his partner-teacher, Margo Effland, team-taught special ed kids.

After graduation, if a player wanted to continue playing in college and let him know, Merv would help get them a football scholarship. One didn't even have to go to BHS to get help. He helped kids from other

Quad City schools. He'd make a phone call to a coach he knew at the college of choice and give a recommendation. He knew many college coaches because he went to their clinics and as his fame grew, he spoke at their clinics.

Merv always assumed that we were partners in this coaching gig and that I would be welcome any place he was welcome. One day, the father of a player, called and invited Merv to go to Super Bowl XVI in Detroit with him and some other doctor friends in a private plane. I cringed when I heard Merv ask, "Can I bring my wife?" It was like a 6 or 8 passenger plane. (No, there wasn't room) Then there was the time he was being interviewed on the field after a state championship win. When he saw the TV camera, he put his arm around me and pulled me close as he answered the questions. We laughed when we saw it on TV that night. They had zoomed in on him and cropped me out of the picture. Nice try, honey. I did get into the interview with the Fort Dodge Sports editor during halftime during one Iowa Hawkeye game. Merv told him that Pat Halligan (an all-state half back at FDHS) was his brother-in-law. I admitted that I had no identity of my own: I grew up being Pat Halligan's sister, then Merv Habenicht's wife, but the best was when the sweet young thing at the hardware store asked me if I was Kurt Habenicht's mother. I was proud to plead guilty to all of the above. Later Merv got a letter through the High School, from the head of the Iowa High School Athletic Association, Bernie Sagau, addressed to "Evelyn Habenicht's husband." He had read the article in the *Fort Dodge Messenger*!

What was it like being a Bulldog? We came here in 1960, straight out of college when I was 26 years old. When Merv advanced to assistant varsity, we went to post-game parties that included the mayor, the police chief, the city attorney, and other powerful political people and their spouses. I have no idea if other schools had fans as loyal as we did, but I doubt it, except maybe Assumption. As a coach's wife, I tried to follow the examples of Dorothy Parsons and Rose Oles, my predecessors. Gradually as I gained confidence, I found my own way of contributing.

When Merv got the head job and we began to win and win and win, it was an indescribable high. We were all guilty of the sin of Pride—and how we loved it! It got so that it wasn't enough to win the conference and make the playoffs... we were supposed to win the state championship every year! And we did!... five times! Our daughter Karen and two other moms of the players started the "Football Mom's Spirit Club." They decorated their yards and fences, painted the field, made wooden footballs with the player's number on them on a stake for each player's yard. They grew from 3 to 70 members in the first season and are still active today. Merv used to say: "We are all a part of the Bulldog victories! Everyone, from the janitors, bus drivers, faculty, administrators, parents, and fans contribute to our success." He truly believed that.

Merv got to coach his two sons: Bobby (free safety) and Kurt (linebacker), then a grandson, Abraham Blair (linebacker) during his tenure. He would have liked to stay a few more years and coached another grandson, Anthony Losasso (linebacker), in their 2007 state championship, 13-0 season. Would they have had that record? Sure! Randy would have helped make it happen! Oh, and Kurt—who was voted "Most Valuable Player" by his team mates in both football and wrestling—has coached his son, Bobby, in football from kindergarten through 8th grade, about 106 games, in Boise, Idaho. It's the gene pool, you know. Kurt would call and consult his dad about the offense or defense of an upcoming opponent, seeking Merv's sage advice. It made my heart sing to hear them conferring, father and son.

This observation about the entire BETT football experience as well as Merv and I was given to me by the mother of the author of this book and these observations really moved me because they are so true: "Mrs. Habenicht perfectly described what 'it' was all about as she described the life of Coach H in which she

played an equally important role. ‘It’ meaning the magic that can only be felt from participating, in our own way, in the world of BHS football. Of course... the image seared in my mind for me was, is, and always will be the first time I saw you all coming down the hill to the field. Holding hands. En masse. United. I have never seen or felt that kind of unity/power you all generated together before—and it was amazing. It permeated the entire stadium setting the scene for what was to unfold—win or lose. I can still see it in Technicolor in my mind and feel it in my heart... transposed back in that reality.... just like that. And the two of them were extraordinary together.”

Merv and I would have celebrated 59 years of marriage in December of 2012. During the years of his retirement, before he got ill, he brought me a dozen roses every week. He never tired of holding my hand, whether in church, walking in the mall, or riding in the car. I always knew he loved me because he told me every day several times a day. We were partners in every way. ***I know that because he always told me that I was the reason he became a success.*** I had urged him to leave the security of working at the packing plant to finish college and fulfill his dream of being a coach... and what a coach! Not just of football, but a coach for living for all those young men. I miss him every minute of every day.

*Mrs. Evelyn Habenicht*

*January 4th, 2013*