

“MR. ENTHUSIASM”:
BILL ZORN, ATHLETIC DIRECTOR, DEAN OF MEN, COACH, INSTRUCTOR
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE 1928-1968

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Abstract

Willis “Bill” Zorn was an administrator, athletic director, coach, and instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire for over 40 years in the twentieth century. He was a very prominent figure at the university during his tenure and is still recognized today at UW-Eau Claire in the hallways at W.L. Zorn Arena. The arena dedicated to Zorn is home of the UW-Eau Claire Men’s and Women’s basketball teams, as well as the commencement ceremonies and other events at the university. His role at the school was instrumental in the development of intercollegiate athletics. This paper will go in depth into Zorn’s policies as coach and administrator, and how they changed the university. In addition, the paper will analyze Zorn’s roles on campus and perceptions of him from students, athletes, and faculty. I will also give a brief history on the development of intercollegiate athletics to put Zorn’s work at Eau Claire into historical context.

Introduction

“He was the greatest man on this earth -- unequalled. I was one of the fortunate ones who had a chance to know him and play for him.”¹ Tom Lehman, former player of Bill Zorn’s in the 1940’s.

John Wooden, Dean Smith, Bill Zorn. Most fans of the sport of basketball are familiar with the first two names on that list. Both of these names are synonymous with coaching success. John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach at UCLA coached the Bruins from 1948-1975. Dean Smith, another basketball legend coached the North Carolina Tar Heels from 1961-1997. Unless you are an UW-Eau Claire student or member of the Eau Claire community, you would more than likely not recognize the name Bill Zorn or know why there is a gymnasium named in his honor. Students and faculty alike know Zorn Arena as the home of the Blugold Men’s and Women’s basketball teams as well as the place where they will receive their college degree in a commencement ceremony. However, most are unaware of why the arena was named after this man. The purpose of my paper is to inform readers on an aspect of institutional history at UW-Eau Claire by giving an overview of a man who shaped the university into what it is today. Not only as a coach, but as a man who at one time held five positions on campus.

As a former UW-Eau Claire men’s basketball player, an aspiring teacher, and coach at the high school or collegiate level, I was intrigued by this topic from the beginning. The UW-Eau Claire Men’s Basketball Program is unique for the fact that it has only seen two other coaches since Zorn arrived in 1928. As the scholar first to write on this topic, finding secondary sources relating to Zorn was a bit of a struggle. My major secondary source was Hilda Carter’s *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976*. This book gives a history of UW-Eau Claire since it became a college. Zorn’s roles on campus are discussed throughout the

¹ Leader Telegram, May 22, 1987.

book. Another useful secondary source was Ronald Smith's dissertation "From Normal School to State University: A History of the Wisconsin State University Conference" which gave a detailed history of the conference Zorn coached in for 40 years.

The major primary sources I used were the Bill Zorn papers, 1925-1970. These are a collection of Zorn's work as a coach, athletic director and university administrator. It gave me an in-depth look at the development of UW-Eau Claire. I also did several interviews, including a former player of Zorn's from the 1940's as well as Zorn's son, Bill Jr. Ron Buckli, sportswriter at the *Leader Telegram* has covered sports in Eau Claire for 50 years, sent me several of the articles he wrote on Zorn while he was still working at the university. Finally, I consulted the *Periscope*, UW-Eau Claire's yearbooks.

I felt it would do a disservice to my paper if I did not include an introductory chapter that put Zorn in a historical context. Giving the reader a perspective of the period before reading about Zorn will help in the understanding of the paper. I will begin by giving a brief history of the development of college athletics, the beginning of the paid, full-time college coach, and intercollegiate athletics in Wisconsin.

The Beginning of College Athletics

You will not find intercollegiate athletics in UW-Eau Claire's or any university's mission statement. However, athletics has now commanded the attention of college campuses across the United States for more than a century. Intercollegiate athletics has fascinated our country since its inception in 1843, when Yale University created the first organized sports club, a boating team.² Harvard followed one year later creating a similar club. Then nine years later, in 1852, the first intercollegiate athletic event took place, when the rowing team from Yale competed against Harvard.³ This event began the spreading of intercollegiate athletics in colleges across the United States.

College sports originated as simple activities students could participate in to take a break from the classroom. Today, teams represented by a college or university are referred to as intercollegiate athletic teams. For example, the conference UW-Eau Claire competes in is known as the WIAC, which stands for the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. The WIAC competes against some other University of Wisconsin system universities. The WIAC consists of nine universities: UW-Eau Claire, UW-La Crosse, UW-Oshkosh, UW-Platteville, UW-River Falls, UW-Stevens Point, UW-Stout, UW-Superior, and UW-Whitewater. In addition, there are also intramurals and recreational sport clubs available to the student body that does not participate on a university sponsored athletic team.

In the early 1900's college athletics really appeared on the scene. They gave an identity to communities and provided opportunities for students and faculty to take part in an out of class experience which helped to unite the university. As student body numbers increased in the early

² Ronald A. Smith. *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 26.

³ Ibid., 27.

1900's, athletics played an increasing role in creating community amongst the town and the students.⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century intercollegiate athletics brought students of various colleges' together, displaying excellence and competition that faculty members rarely saw in the classroom. Team sports on college campuses had a way of drawing the student body together in "dynamic, yet symbolic activities."⁵

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Ibid., 22.

The Introduction of the Coach

Bill Zorn coached at UW-Eau Claire from 1928 to 1968. The coach is looked to for leadership from his or her players and nobody seemed to do this like Bill Zorn. However, the coach was not always around and this precedent set the stage for Zorn's arrival at Eau Claire.

As college enrollments and intercollegiate sports continued to grow, it called for a type of older leadership in the form of coaching and training. In response to this vacancy, Yale hired William Wood in 1864 as their crew coach.⁶ Wood, a New York City gymnast and physical education instructor, became the first coach for an American college team.⁷ He implemented several innovative training techniques that had never been used and left a footprint for coaches to follow. By the early 1900's, coaches at leading colleges had become more prestigious, and paid a higher salary than a professor. At times, a coach was more visible than the president of the college.⁸ The introduction of the paid, full-time coach into college sports helped the rationalization of intercollegiate athletics.

Paid, full-time coaching was central to the notion of what individuals believed sports were all about. By 1881, it was clear that the paid, full-time coach was going to continue to grow in prestige as athletics continued to grow. An unprecedented event occurred when William Rainey Harper, an ex-Yale man and president of the University of Chicago hired Amos Alonzo Stagg to coach football at \$2,500, a very high salary at the time.⁹ Harper also gave Stagg tenure as an associate professor. Harper's goal was to develop teams that could be "sent around the country and knock out all colleges."¹⁰

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁹ Ibid., 162.

¹⁰ Ibid.

This rise of the paid, full-time coach was a major force in the movement of American intercollegiate athletics. By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, it was clear that this model produced victories and increased the attention paid to the institution. Schools around the country began to take notice and joined the bandwagon. However, some felt that the professional coach did a disservice to college sports. Some thought these coaches brought a “win at all costs” attitude, disrupting the ideals of higher education. In the end, the desire to win trumped all other arguments.

Intercollegiate Athletics to Wisconsin

Intercollegiate athletics was a post-Civil War occurrence in Wisconsin. The state's largest institution was the University of Wisconsin.¹¹ Most of the other system schools were known as normal schools.¹² Normal schools were primarily two year schools to train teachers. The first of these normal schools to open were Platteville and was followed by Whitewater, Oshkosh, River Falls, Milwaukee, Stevens Point, Superior, and La Crosse. In 1916, Eau Claire was established as the last normal school. The forming of these schools came to be known as the Wisconsin State University Conference (WSUC). Today, is it known as the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (WIAC).¹³

Sports in normal schools began quickly after the schools were created. Many of the early schools' students were Civil War veterans whom had recently returned from service. However, "organization of athletic teams must have been far from the minds of the state legislators who created the normal school system."¹⁴ Since normal schools were created primarily to train grade school teachers, they were usually geared more towards women. Not until the beginning of the twentieth century did men account for more than one-third of the population of normal schools.¹⁵ As the male population increased, sports at the normal schools became more popular.

Basketball became the WSUC's first official sport and began to receive recognition for both men and women. Twenty years before Zorn arrived as basketball coach at Eau Claire, the sport was looked at as mostly a "ladies game."¹⁶ In 1899 a men's basketball team was formed at Oshkosh, surprisingly coached by a woman. Subsequently, in 1903 a woman coached both

¹¹ The institution was not named University of Wisconsin-Madison until 1971.

¹² Ronald A. Smith, "From Normal School to State University: A History of the Wisconsin State University Conference" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1969), ii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

Platteville's men's and women's team. However, the female coaching trend within the conference would not last very long. Soon basketball became popular with men at normal schools. The first men's basketball team was organized at Milwaukee Normal in 1895. By 1901, men's teams were organized at Oshkosh, Superior, Stevens Point, Platteville, and River Falls.¹⁷

Due to the growing popularity of sports in the WSUC, there was also a demand for a professional coach for the athletic teams. By the 1890's the normal schools were hiring and setting aside funds specifically for the professional coach. The desire to win prompted the normal schools to hire experienced ex-players to coach their teams.¹⁸ By 1912, there was a full time coach and physical training instructor at all of the normal schools.¹⁹ Zorn's hiring at Eau Claire in 1928 came after he had three successful seasons at Waite High School in Toledo, Ohio.²⁰

Recruiting became a focal point at the normal schools in an attempt to gain a competitive edge. The coaches were concerned about what kind of athlete they were bringing into their programs. The coaches were interested in recruiting males who would bring skills and winning attitudes to their team. In 1930, Eau Claire President H.A. Schofield started holding annual recruiting banquets for athletes from nearby high schools.²¹ Guest speakers at these annual banquets included high profile names like Alonzo Stagg of the University of Chicago. Ronald Smith had this to say about the recruitment of athletes to the normal schools:

Nevertheless, the amount of money spent to get quality athletes to attend the conference schools was probably many times less than that spent by larger colleges and universities.

¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹ Ibid., 77.

²⁰ Hilda R. Carter, *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire Foundation, 1976), 9.

²¹ Smith, "From Normal School to State University: A History of the Wisconsin State University Conference", 193.

Yet, the desire for and recruitment of athletes was considered an important aspect of the school program by most presidents and coaches of the Wisconsin normal schools (teachers colleges by the 1930's).²²

The 1960's saw an expansion of the WSUC. This was mostly due to the success and positive influence of the Big Ten Conference.²³ The Big Ten Conference was formed in 1895 and was comprised of the University of Chicago, University of Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, Northwestern University, Purdue University and the University of Wisconsin. Indiana University and the State University of Iowa were admitted in 1899. Ohio State joined in 1912. Chicago withdrew in 1946 and Michigan State College (now Michigan State University) was added three years later in 1949.²⁴ Former Big Ten athletes were looked at to "provide athletic leadership as coaches through the whole history of the league."²⁵ When the WSUC was founded, it was based upon the Big Ten concept of "faculty control and an organization of faculty representatives to legislate and administer the league."²⁶ The responsibilities of the conference commissioner were taken directly from the Big Ten. Several conference officials, including Bill Zorn "definitely looked up to the Big Ten for leadership."²⁷

By 1964, state colleges had been granted university status. Colleges offer a collection of degrees in specific areas where a university is a collection of colleges and usually much larger. Representatives decided to join the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA). The NAIA was formed to promote the smaller colleges while the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) was dominated by the larger colleges and universities, like the Big Ten that offered athletic scholarships.

²² Ibid., 195.

²³ Ibid., 307.

²⁴ Big Ten Official Athletic Website, "Big Ten History," <http://bigten.cstv.com/trads/big10-trads.html> (accessed April 2, 2009).

²⁵ Smith, "From Normal School to State University: A History of the Wisconsin State University Conference", 307.

²⁶ Ibid., 307.

²⁷ Ibid., 310.



W.L. "Bill" Zorn

Source: <http://www2.uwec.edu/Library/archives/exhibits/buildings/zorn.htm>

Bill Zorn – Coach, Athletic Director

"You could talk to a million people whose lives he touched, and you would have a hard time getting a bad word about Bill Zorn."²⁸ Ron Buckli, Leader Telegram.

Bill Zorn was born March 30, 1899 in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. He graduated from Stevens Point High School in 1918 and his collegiate career began at Stevens Point Normal. In his first year in 1921, he joined the football and basketball teams. He then transferred to the University of Chicago where he played for the legendary coach Alonzo Stagg. Zorn excelled, becoming nationally recognized as one of the country's elite running backs and was recognized

²⁸ Leader Telegram, May 22, 1987.

as an All-American.²⁹ Zorn was thought of as the Big Ten's best player in his senior season.³⁰ At the time many sports fans felt Zorn was comparable in talent to the great Red Grange who played for the University of Illinois and later the Chicago Bears. One sportswriter in Chicago said this about Zorn's team's chances against Illinois: "Why all this talk about Grange of Illinois? Do we forget that right here in our backyard at Stagg field we have the greatest all-around player in the country, fullback Zorn – a consistent gainer and a whiz on defense?"³¹ Zorn's team was defeated by Illinois 7-0. However, it was after a "bruising battle that featured the constant collisions of Zorn and Grange. It was only one of two losses suffered by Chicago in the three years Zorn played there."³² In addition to football, Zorn also played baseball, basketball, track, and curling. In the classroom, Zorn also excelled receiving his Ph.B (Bachelor of Philosophy). Zorn later earned his Master's degree from the University of Minnesota and University of Colorado.

After college, Zorn coached one year at a Hedding College in Abington, Illinois and coached football and basketball for three years at Waite High School in Toledo, Ohio. He led his football team to a 23-4-2 record during his three seasons, leading them to an Ohio state championship in 1925, 1926 and was runner-up in 1927. Zorn had a team that went through the season undefeated and played in the high school football national tournament at the University of Pennsylvania. The following year Zorn's team was a runner-up in Ohio and won their first game at the University of Chicago in the Stagg National Tournament.

In 1924, Zorn married his high school and college sweetheart Virginia while he was coaching in Toledo. They had two children, Bill Jr. and Amy Lou. Bill Jr. is currently 86 years

²⁹ Leader Telegram, November 16, 2008.

³⁰ Leader Telegram, September, 19, 1999.

³¹ Leader Telegram, unknown, 1988.

³² Ibid.

old and resides in Eau Claire. He was a three year letter winner on the University of Wisconsin basketball team and coached at Ladysmith high school. He also was an assistant coach for his father's basketball teams for several seasons.³³

In 1928, Zorn started coaching basketball and football at the Eau Claire State Normal School replacing E.C. Gerber as the director of physical education for men. Zorn's college coach, Alonzo Stagg played an integral role in Zorn getting his job at Eau Claire Normal.³⁴ As a coach, Zorn was known to implement similar coaching techniques to Stagg's. Zorn immediately gained the respect of both students and faculty and impressed everyone as "an excellent, enthusiastic, coach and a real gentleman."³⁵ As soon as Zorn arrived on campus he realized his football team was already in full training, working hard to become a successful team. His first team consisted of 11 returning players and 23 new players. Although Zorn had enough players to form a team, they were all relatively small and this proved to be the biggest challenge for Zorn's first season. The first game under Zorn took place only four days after he arrived on campus against Fort Snelling.³⁶ They were defeated mostly due to lack of practice time.

However, spirit and optimism was high in Zorn's first season regardless of wins and losses:

Zorn soon had the team ready for the season, with fighting ability and excellent team work. And, though not able to bring home any winning scores, the members of the team have won the admiration of all followers for being real football players. They have not only played the game fairly and squarely, but have put forth all their energy in every game, and have thus revealed true sportsmanship.³⁷

Zorn served as a one-man athletic coaching staff during his first 15 years. He coached football, basketball, baseball and track in addition to teaching physical education.³⁸ This job

³³ Bill Zorn Jr., interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, March 28, 2009.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "The Periscope", University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire's yearbook, 1929, 107.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Leader Telegram, November 16, 2008.

description would seem impossible to most nowadays mostly because of the increased length of athletic seasons. Rarely today at universities do coaches hold more than one or two positions. Zorn at one time held six; football, basketball and track coach, athletic director, dean of men, and physical education instructor. Zorn's reputation at Eau Claire was described as an "Alonzo Stagg type of man, an excellent coach and a real gentleman."³⁹ There was one instance early on in Zorn's tenure when the school was coming off a relatively down athletic season. A complaining townsman wrote to school President Schofield addressing the situation. Schofield immediately dismissed the statement and responded by saying that "Bill Zorn was the kind of person he wanted working with his boys."⁴⁰

In the 1930's, Blugold athletics took a step in the right direction starting with men's basketball. Blugold fans referred to Zorn's basketball teams as the "Zornadoes" and the school's newspaper dubbed them as the "Zornmen." "Zornadoes" was a term to describe the team's exciting style of play. One of the highlights of that decade was an undefeated conference season in 1938 and a co-conference championship in 1939. The Eau Claire State Teachers College was the only team to represent Wisconsin at the NAIA Basketball Tournament in Kansas City that same year. The same team was also chosen as one of the 32 most outstanding teams of the nation's four-year colleges.⁴¹

During the time of World War II the enrollment at Eau Claire State Teachers College was declining, and this had a dramatic effect on athletics. With men and women off serving it was hard to find enough players to fill a roster. At the time, this effected Zorn's ability to recruit. He was very open minded accepting the fact he had to make use of the talent he had.⁴²

³⁹ Carter, *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976*, 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴² Dennis Helixon, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, Mar 18, 2009.

After World War II, Zorn's coaching efforts primarily focused on basketball.⁴³ Men eventually returned to campus, and there was a higher emphasis on athletics due to the growing enrollments. After serving in the forces men were anxious to go to school and participate in athletics. This led to an increased participation on Zorn's basketball teams as well. During the years of the war, basketball was played, but mostly by incoming freshman because the rest were off serving in the forces. Dennis "Hooks" Helixon was a player of Zorn's from 1946-48 and was an all conference selection in 1946-47. He spent time in the service before he arrived at Eau Claire to play basketball. He believed that Zorn's philosophy in coaching changed after World War II. Helixon felt that Zorn had to change his approach because he was no longer dealing with 18 year old freshman, but men well into their 20's that had been around the world and fought in a war.⁴⁴ Helixon had nothing but admirable things to say about Zorn while he played under him. "Zorn was a gentleman's gentleman. He treated players as though they were his sons, sometimes chasing them out of bars the night before a game. He was very close to his players. You could take your problems to him and he was always very fair."⁴⁵ Helixon recalled scoring seven "buckets" in one game as a substitute. After his stellar performance he was changed to a starter by Zorn. Zorn was known as to never play favorites on his teams. Whoever was playing the best received the playing time. Helixon felt that Zorn wasn't strict with his players, treating them as mature men.⁴⁶

Zorn was known to have great character, be very funny, and often would be the butt of jokes between him and his players.⁴⁷ Often Zorn was asked if he was related to Jim Zorn, former quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks and current coach of the NFL's Washington

⁴³ Leader Telegram, November 16, 2008.

⁴⁴ Dennis Helixon, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, Mar 18, 2009.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Leader Telegram, May 22, 1987.

Redskins. Zorn would always respond by saying, “Only on his good days.”⁴⁸ Not until 1966 did Zorn’s basketball teams travel to games in buses. Frank Wrigglesworth helped Zorn change his mind when he was an assistant coach under him. Wrigglesworth would say that, “He was the world’s worst driver.”⁴⁹ This was also noted by former player Tom Lehman who said that Zorn even clipped a few mailboxes and the team would then have to, “Sit in the car and wait while he stopped at farmhouses looking for antiques. He was big on antiques.”⁵⁰ If players ever missed curfew on the road, the penalty was that they had ride back to Eau Claire with Zorn.⁵¹

Zorn won conference basketball championships in 1938, 1939, 1955 and 1956, and led his teams to the NAIA National Tournament in Kansas City, Mo., in 1939, 1945, 1946, 1951 and 1956 and had an overall 396-358 record.⁵² In December of 1952, more than 2,000 were in attendance for the dedication of the Eau Claire State University's new gymnasium.⁵³ The stage was set as Zorn defeated his alma mater, The University of Chicago, in fashion, 91-49.⁵⁴

Later in 1953-54, Zorn became the president of the NAIA. He was also a member of the NAIA Hall of Fame and the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame. Zorn was chosen as one of two men chosen to represent Wisconsin District 14 in the NAIA Hall of Fame. This was a well deserved distinction to Zorn. At the time of his nomination he had one of the best coaching records among small colleges in the nation.

In 1958 Zorn was elected to the Helms Hall of Fame for his “outstanding contribution to basketball.”⁵⁵ He retired as the university's athletic director in 1968. To put his role at the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Leader Telegram, November 16, 2008.

⁵³ UW-Eau Claire’s gymnasium was not named “Zorn Arena” until 1987, four months after Zorn’s death. This dedication referred to the new gymnasium that was built in 1952.

⁵⁴ Leader Telegram, November 16, 2008.

⁵⁵ Carter, *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976*, 67.

university in perspective, he was replaced by *three* people to hold all of his previous positions.⁵⁶ He was replaced by Dr. James J. Rice as athletic director, and Ken Anderson as basketball coach. Zorn left Eau Claire to a standing ovation in the packed fieldhouse.⁵⁷ Anderson continued to lead the Blugolds in a successful direction accumulating 631 wins in 27 seasons, but none of it could have been accomplished without Zorn's previous influence on the basketball program and athletic department. "Bill was an institution,"⁵⁸ Ken Anderson would later say after taking over as basketball coach. At the time of Zorn's retirement he had the longest coaching run in the nation.⁵⁹

Richard Knar, a 1957 Eau Claire alumnus, had this to say about Bill Zorn during his time at Eau Claire. "He [Zorn] was always friendly and cheerfully enthusiastic. As a matter of fact, his nickname was Mr. Enthusiasm. He would do anything for you. He would give you the shirt off his back. I was so happy when the university named the gym after him."⁶⁰ Knar was an alumnus of the football team playing every position on the offensive line in 1957. He did not play for Zorn as he was no longer coaching football but had several interactions with him in his position as athletic director.⁶¹

Zorn's football teams were also known for their friendliness and approachability. Zorn often sent his team to help unload furniture of new faculty coming to Eau Claire. Zorn said that the moving of the furniture was "good exercise for their early practice, and getting in shape."⁶²

⁵⁶ Bill Zorn Jr., interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, March 28, 2009.

⁵⁷ Carter, *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976*, 20.

⁵⁸ Ken Anderson, quoted in the Leader Telegram, September, 19, 1999.

⁵⁹ Leader Telegram, September 19, 1999.

⁶⁰ Richard Knar, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, Mar 14, 2009.

⁶¹ Zorn was replaced as football coach after World War II by Ade Olson. Olson's relationship with Zorn spanned 60 years and began in 1928 when he served as an assistant to Zorn's first football team. He took over as head coach in 1947 after Cliff Fagan coached the team from 1944 to 1946. Olson is still recognized today at UW-Eau Claire as the building connected to the McPhee Physical Education Center, known as the "Ade Olson Addition." On October 8, 1988, the addition was dedicated to Ade Olson following his death in February.

⁶² Carter, *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976*, 67.

He was a believer in the early start and “refused to work under the handicap of untried men.”⁶³

This meant Zorn would rather have a player that had been physically and mentally tested as opposed to one that had everything come easy to them and didn’t want to face a challenge.

Tim Peterman, a retired sports information director at Eau Claire, arrived on campus during Zorn’s final year in 1968. He mentioned that Zorn was a man that didn’t swear at his players and often used the term “Son of a Buck” when frustrated. He recalled that as Dean of Men, Zorn would have the new freshman report to the gym early in the school year. At these meetings different university officials would speak to students about different aspects they needed to know about the campus. He said that Zorn would come in and try to get them fired up by “drumming up a little school spirit.”⁶⁴ The term “Son of a Buck” was famous with Zorn and his players. When Helixon and his teammates graduated they bought Zorn an Alumacraft fishing boat and had the name printed on it “Son of a Buck.”⁶⁵ Zorn’s tireless enthusiasm and addicting personality was mentioned by all whom I consulted. He was always optimistic and positive even if his teams were struggling. At one time, Eau Claire sold “Mr. Enthusiasm” buttons in honor of Zorn.⁶⁶

Zorn believed basketball gave him more than just a job to go to everyday. He felt basketball was a whole way of life. Zorn stated: “The chance it has given me to work with many fine men and boys in our community, is what I thank basketball for more than anything else.”⁶⁷ Zorn was quoted as seeing several changes in basketball in his first 30 years of coaching. He noticed the changes from the days of the left and right forwards, center guards, and standing

⁶³ Spectator, September 29, 1933.

⁶⁴ Tim Peterman, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, Feb 4, 2009.

⁶⁵ Dennis Helixon, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, Mar 18, 2009.

⁶⁶ Eau Claire Leader, May 22, 1987.

⁶⁷ Bill Zorn, interview with Jim Boullion, Leader Telegram, 1958. Box 12. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970. Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

guards to the present positions. These positions are not recognized by these names in the present day. He also believed that these changes improved the game. When asked why basketball was on such a rise to many different changes he responded by saying: “The YMCA, more interest in the game, especially to the youngsters themselves. The kind who asks for a letter sweater and basketball hoop placed on the garage, barn or light pole even before they start school.”⁶⁸ Zorn saw this increase in popularity in his own teams as well with increased interest in participation especially as his program’s success began to rise.

Zorn wanted to win and win he did, but he never put too much emphasis on winning. He highlighted concepts such as “playing fairly, learning how to give and take, developing healthy bodies and strong minds, and molding characters that will be a credit to the communities.”⁶⁹ He felt that there were more important things in life than just sports.⁷⁰ “Although he was one of the most successful coaches and most decorated men of his time, Zorn will be remembered more for his service to humanity than the number of wins.”⁷¹ In viewing Zorn’s summer letters to his football players he focused on several key ideas; mainly getting in shape, going to bed early, waking up early, getting eight hours of sleep, and no smoking or drinking. Here is a sample of a letter to a returning player in the summer of 1939:

Off the field you are your own quarterback calling your own signals. You can call these expected leaders or you can disappoint your dad, mother, coaches and friends. Don’t delay! Get in shape! Eight hours sleep! No drinking! No smoking! Wind sprints! You have read long and hard about what happens when you are not prepared. Poland, Belgium and France have learned. They would like a chance to prepare for Blitzkrieg that came but now it is too late. They had the opportunity but sat back satisfied. Profit by their experience.⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Zorn was noted by his son as being a very good “church-goer.” He would often wake up early on Sundays to hunt and would return Sunday evenings for church service.

⁷¹ Leader Telegram, May 22, 1987.

⁷² Bill Zorn to football player, summer 1940. Box 9. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970.

Recruiting was another area where Zorn excelled. The majority of his recruiting came after World War II as there was a higher potential for student-athletes due to increased enrollments. In researching Zorn's papers, his recruiting letters to potential student-athletes were personal and eloquent. If a potential student-athlete wrote him concerned about their financial situation he always said he would help them get a campus job. Zorn didn't always get all the recruits he wanted but he always wished them good luck in their future endeavors even if they decided not to attend Eau Claire. In a letter to Zorn in 1967 from a potential recruit, he was told that they would be coming to Eau Claire if they didn't get accepted by the University of South Florida. Zorn stated, "We want you at Eau Claire this coming year, but I did give you a good recommendation. Best of success and I hope it's with the Blugolds."⁷³ Zorn did not hide the fact that he wanted these potential student-athletes attending Eau Claire. In July of 1967, Zorn wrote a letter to a potential student athlete comparing the tuition costs of Eau Claire against Creighton University. He affirmed Ron Prien in a breakdown of tuition, which included room and board. At Eau Claire he would be spending \$1,320 a year and at Creighton he would be paying \$1,960 (quite a discrepancy at that time).⁷⁴ He did something similar for a student comparing Eau Claire and Carthage College by finding an exact \$1,000 less in tuition at Eau Claire.⁷⁵

Zorn had several innovative ideas during his tenure at Eau Claire. In 1955 he began instituting what he referred to as "Dad's Nights" for his players.⁷⁶ This was similar to what most of us know as parent's night today. He asked that all of his players bring their parents to a game

⁷³ Bill Zorn to Lee Anderson of Clear Lake, 21 August 1967. Box 2. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970.

⁷⁴ Bill Zorn to Ron Prien, 7 July 1967. Box 2. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970.

⁷⁵ Bill Zorn to Rocky Slawinski, 10 July 1967. Box 2. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970.

⁷⁶ I was not sure why he referred to this occasion just as "Dad's Night." Zorn also made a point in his letters do invite the mother as well.

once a year and stick around for a post game celebration. An example of a letter Zorn would send to one of his football player's father usually followed this form:

Dear Dad:

That day we look forward to each fall is fast approaching and we want you to visit the college and see your son in action. What a great job those boys are doing this year. We are all mighty proud of them. Saturday October 8 we would like you and mom here for our game with Stout. Game time is 7:30. We will seat you on the side lines and after the game will serve some light refreshments in the college cafeteria. We sincerely hope you can be with us at that time.

Sincerely,

Bill Zorn

Athletic Department⁷⁷

These occasions were generally well attended by the parents each year and increased the popularity of the athletic department. The same year Zorn attempted to get the Minneapolis Lakers to play a game in Eau Claire against the St. Louis Hawks of the National Basketball Association. The game was tentatively planned for October 26, 1955. However, the Lakers asked that they receive \$1,500 plus an option of choosing 50 percent of the net receipts.⁷⁸ Zorn also had correspondence with George Mikan in 1955 (Mikan's first year of retirement) to ask him if he would come and be a guest speaker to his team. Mikan at the time was considered one of the greatest basketball players of all time and revolutionized the game with his size and agility. At the time of his correspondence with Zorn he was working in the front office with the Minneapolis Lakers.

Another instance where Zorn was successful in his innovations was his ability to sell the university and athletic department by maintaining great relationships with boosters and sponsors. He would often quote "We definitely have something to sell" in regards to the university and

⁷⁷ Bill Zorn to player parents, 29 September 1955. Box 10. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970.

⁷⁸ I found no evidence that this game took place in researching the Minneapolis Lakers 1955 basketball schedule.

athletic department.⁷⁹ He was always trying to do what was best for the university, not only with his athletic department, but for the entire school in general. During the 1960's when the university was expanding in size he would always tell anyone interested in the athletic programs that the university was growing in the size of enrollment, faculty, class buildings, and dormitories.

Coaching in addition to serving as an athletic director are not easy tasks. An athletic director is responsible for overseeing all of the athletic teams at the school. Zorn's role as coach and athletic director was vital in the early history of the development of the athletic program at Eau Claire. Much of his influence is why athletics at UW-Eau Claire are as successful as they are today. Zorn played a pivotal role in the establishment of a basketball program that at one time, had trouble even forming a team.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Bill Zorn to Susie's on Water Street, 7 February 1957. Box 9. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970.

⁸⁰ Carter, *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976*, 7.

Bill Zorn – Dean of Men

*“You don’t replace a gentleman, and Bill was a gentleman. He wanted all of his players to get degrees. He didn’t exploit them, and he cared about them long after they left the university. He really taught more than sports—he taught life. He’s done things for players and families no one will ever know about. He’s tops in my books.”*⁸¹ Ken Anderson, *UW-Eau Claire Basketball Coach 1968-1995*.

With all the success Zorn had in the athletic department, he also held the position of Dean of Men. The Dean of Men was responsible for overseeing the men at the college. This usually consisted of disciplining, housing arrangements, and administrative services at the school. Zorn had great influence during the time the country was approaching war. By 1941, times were becoming difficult in the United States. World War II had not yet begun but newspapers and radios were circulating, taking over the culture. At this time the country was also just recently getting out of the Great Depression and many Americans were still struggling financially.⁸² In Eau Claire in 1942, there were courses adopted to train students for the Army, Navy, and Marines to fill some of the needs of the country. These consisted of intense drills to enhance physical conditioning.⁸³ Earlier in the year the university became accredited in the training of the V-1 Naval Program, and Zorn was given the responsibility of supervising. In

⁸¹ Leader Telegram, May 22, 1987.

⁸² Jay, Kathryn, *More than Just a Game: Sports in American Life since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9.

⁸³ Carter, *The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: A History, 1916-1976*, 43.

addition, in the spring of 1943, a V-6 Refresher Program was offered to high school seniors for \$12. These were designed to prepare them for the radio technicians qualifying test.⁸⁴

During World War II, an Army training unit was attached to the Eau Claire State Teachers College. These training regiments were in part to the influence of President Davies. He wrote to Senator Alexander Wiley in December of 1942 requesting that a unit be assigned to the college to help with the war effort. Zorn was assigned to “coordinate the use of facilities between the detachment and the regular college population.”⁸⁵ Whatever the university’s needs were at the time, Zorn never hesitated to lend a helping hand. However, there was still an issue of housing for the trainees. Faculty was willing to provide the gymnasium and locker rooms for barracks. This training program lasted until June of 1944. Eau Claire placed in the top ten percent on the basis of overall evaluation tests by the Psychological Testing Unit at Santa Ana Army Base.⁸⁶ For both Davies’s and Zorn’s contributions during this time they both received Certificate of Services Awards:

One of the highlights of the last few months was a demonstration, using personnel of the 301st Aircrew Detachment of physical fitness staged for school principles, superintendents, coaches, and physical education directors in the Eau Claire area, arranged by Mr. Zorn to give local officials the benefit of his experience with the training detachment.⁸⁷

In 1943, the Administrative Council of the faculty elected Zorn as the vice chairman. The council adopted a plan for “deduction of one-half of one percent of faculty salaries for public relations purposes which were listed as maintaining contact with area news media, entertaining

⁸⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

school administrators, civic groups, regents, and legislators.”⁸⁸ This eventually led to closer ties within the area schools and raised the potential for area high school students to attend Eau Claire.

In 1946, the American Federation of Teachers, Local 917 was created in Eau Claire. Zorn was appointed to be the sergeant of arms. This federation dealt with problems like sick leaves, summer school, community relations, accident protection, and salaries.⁸⁹ Zorn was also a key member of the committee on the creation of education facilities for the campus school, teacher training, theatre, and physical education in 1950. These facilities are still at Eau Claire today. They were designed by Eschweiler and Eschweiler, a Milwaukee based architectural firm.⁹⁰ In October of 1950 the ceremony of the facility took place. Prominent state figures were in attendance for the ceremony including the governor and four college presidents (La Crosse, River Falls, Superior, Stout). Zorn’s contributions were toward his work in the physical education program:

The physical education building and gymnasium were the province of Bill Zorn, who arranged with the campus school principal hours in which the gym would be available for campus school programs. Both college and high school basketball competition took place in the gymnasium-fieldhouse, and it was also used for commencements and lectures. On the west side of the building was a suite of offices for the college health service.⁹¹

In 1947, Zorn had big involvement in the discussion to create a field house for the teachers college as he represented a part of the booster meeting of 50 people, including President Davies. The boosters agreed to raise \$20,000 to guarantee that the community was behind the project. There was also a promise of a gymnasium in addition to the complex. Unfortunately,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 65.

⁹¹ Ibid., 66.

after meeting with the governor in 1948, the project was discontinued.⁹² However, this new gymnasium was eventually built in 1952.

The 1960's began a new form of student government at Eau Claire and student punishments became more apparent. Students could be disciplined for simple actions like being barefoot in Davies Center, or hanging a flag from a residence hall. At this time it was possible for Zorn as dean to break up a party on Water Street and many times students were suspended or placed on probation as a consequence.⁹³ Zorn was known as a very nice compassionate man when dealing with behavior issues. At the same time he would not be afraid to discipline students if they acted out. In 1968, Zorn placed a student on social probation for using a forged faculty and staff car registration sticker. In his letter to the student he stated, "I am sorry this action is necessary and trust you will lead an exemplary life in the future."⁹⁴ Zorn felt that discipline at times was necessary, but if you could teach someone what they did wrong it would be much more valuable.⁹⁵

Zorn helped the expansion of a state normal school that began with 159 students and 20 faculty members in 1916, to a college of 7,248 by his retirement in 1968.⁹⁶ It was transformed from simply a diploma granting institution to a multipurpose college that offered a liberal arts degree, two professional degrees, and majors in 22 departments. The campus's overall value increased from \$300,000 to \$7,000,000 and expanded to 250 total acres of land.

⁹² Ibid., 54-55.

⁹³ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁴ Bill Zorn to student, 1968. Box 9. Bill Zorn Papers, 1925-1970.

⁹⁵ Bill Zorn Jr., interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, March 28, 2009.

⁹⁶ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, University Historical Factbook Index, "Student Data, Enrollment 1968-69," http://www.uwec.edu/IR/Historical_webpages/upload/1968-69.pdf (accessed 10 May 2009).

Conclusion

“He was just an absolute role model. He never took a drink, he never smoked and he never swore.”⁹⁷ Frank Wrigglesworth, played three sports under Zorn in the 1930’s and assisted Zorn in 1966.

“This university has been fortunate to have your expert professional services in athletics, not only for the technical competence that you brought, but even more important for the leadership in the development of young men who have served on your 40 teams. Your loyalty and enthusiasm have been major factors in the development and growth of our fine university.”⁹⁸ Leonard Haas, tribute to Zorn after his retirement as coach in 1968.

Not many can say they have done as much as Bill Zorn did at UW-Eau Claire during his 40 years. From the dual role in the athletic department as coach and athletic director, to his role as dean of men he laid a footprint for what the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire should be and is today. In 1973 Zorn was elected into University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Athletic Hall of Fame for his work as a coach and athletic director. In addition, there is now an annual \$750 scholarship in Zorn’s name. The Bill and Virginia Zorn Scholarship is intended for “students in

⁹⁷ Leader Telegram, May 22, 1987.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

their senior year in college with satisfactory academic standing, and financial need.”⁹⁹ Zorn passed away in the spring of 1987 at the age of 88. Four months after his death the university named the home of the men’s and women’s basketball team Zorn Arena in his honor. He was a huge influence on a lot of students that attended Eau Claire. “His whole life was the university.”¹⁰⁰

The next time you are walking through Zorn Arena on your way to class, or perhaps one day walking to receive your college diploma, take a look at the picture of Willis Zorn in the front hallway. Recall why the university named such a prestigious part of its campus after a man that laid the footprint for it to be one of the most respected universities in the Midwestern United States.

⁹⁹ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. “Foundation Scholarships.” <http://www.uwec.edu/oakdev/fou800/criteria/5493.htm> (accessed April 1, 2009).

¹⁰⁰ Link Walker, quoted in the Leader Telegram, September, 19, 1999.

Appendix

Figure 1

Bill Zorn's basketball coaching records from 1928-1968

Source: http://www.uwec.edu/athletics/mbkb/webpdf/0809/media_guide.pdf

<u>Season</u>	<u>Season Record</u>	<u>Conference Record</u>	<u>Coach</u>
1928-29	3-10	1-7	Bill Zorn
1929-30	9-4	4-4	Bill Zorn
1930-31	1-13	0-9	Bill Zorn
1931-32	5-11	0-10	Bill Zorn
1932-33	3-11	1-8	Bill Zorn
1933-34	7-6	2-6	Bill Zorn
1934-35	7-8	3-5	Bill Zorn
1935-36	7-8	4-4	Bill Zorn
1936-37	11-4	4-4	Bill Zorn
1937-38	15-2	6-2*	Bill Zorn
1939-40	18-3	6-2	Bill Zorn
1940-41	6-12	1-7	Bill Zorn
1941-42	9-8	3-5	Bill Zorn
1942-43	9-8	6-4	Bill Zorn
1943-44	9-6	1-2	Bill Zorn
1944-45	10-8	4-2	Bill Zorn
1945-46	18-5	8-0*	Bill Zorn
1946-47	13-6	6-4	Bill Zorn
1947-48	12-9	7-3	Bill Zorn
1948-49	10-11	6-6	Bill Zorn
1949-50	7-15	4-8	Bill Zorn
1950-51	17-6	10-2	Bill Zorn
1951-52	12-8	7-5	Bill Zorn
1952-53	9-12	6-6	Bill Zorn
1953-54	12-9	9-3	Bill Zorn

Source: "The Periscope", University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire's yearbook, 1968, 202.
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