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Hoosier Basketball Boy

How does one measure the worth of a man? By the wealth he accumulates? By the family he raises? By the honors he earns? By his words or his actions? Or perhaps by the people he knows? And, when calculating the total sum, what measurement matters most in the search for a real hero?

A young boy bounces his barn ball, avoiding the dead boards. He shoots – he scores! The barn cat jumps down for the hay loft, grumpy because his nap has been interrupted, yet again, by this Hoosier basketball boy. The boy waves to his father who is feeding the animals, one of the boy's chores that he had offered to do tonight, as he does so often, so that the boy can practice or play in games. Wanting to enter the world of Indiana basketball, he combines his talent and competitive spirit with hard work and so poises again to take another shot...

Irvin Wayne Pratt, the third child of four, was born to Russell and Ethel Pratt on a farm in Miami County, Indiana. He attended Macy Elementary, first through third grades, and Akron School, fourth grade through high school. An involved student, he participated in FFA, 4-H, track, baseball, softball and basketball, as well as helped with the family farm. The easy-smiling, dark-haired, brown-eyed boy was competitive and eager to achieve. 'Farmer boy' Pratt earned the title Fulton County Corn King at a 4-H corn festival for having the best ten ears of corn, three years in a row.

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Shortly after Irvin completed high school, a Ball State coach visited the farm to encourage him to attend Ball State Teachers College to further his education and play athletics. This first-generation college student set out to earn a bachelor degree in Industrial Arts and Physical Education. During 1948, the freshman played football and basketball. He had planned to also play baseball, but during spring plowing, a tractor ran over his father. In order to keep the farm, he hitch-hiked home every Friday, plowing, planting and then hitch-hiking back on Monday.

During his sophomore year, the Korean War forced boys from every corner of Indiana to drop their basketballs, school books, and feeding buckets to serve in the United States Army. Beginning in September 1951, the soldier served twenty-one months of active duty in an independent artillery outfit that used eight-inch howitzers. His outfit constantly moved from one coast to the other along the border at the 38th parallel. After becoming a unit leader, Irvin was honorably discharged in June of 1953. He came home to a nation which was ambiguous in its feelings towards the Korean War – no ticker tape parades or memorials, just silence. So he kept silent too. Through the years, his family heard a memory here and there ~ a black soldier he wrote letters home for because the man could not write – a dog the unit cared for – the Korean people who took refuge near the American artillery. They knew there was more, but they respected his silence. He still staunchly defends American troops and was present at the opening of the Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

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In August of 1953, he became husband to Marlene Koenig, a fellow Cardinal and first-generation college student from Fort Wayne, Indiana, whom he met at a fraternity dance.

Marlene, also a teacher, graduated in June of 1953, and taught while he returned to Ball State to finish his last year. Irvin and Marlene had two children, Lynn, who was born in 1958, and Craig, who was born ten years later. Always his helpmate and loyal supporter, Marlene remained a constant, quiet presence at all of his games. Irvin had picked the perfect coach's wife.

Irvin began his career at Springfield Township in Franklin County, Indiana, where he taught industrial arts and physical education and coached basketball for three years. He remembers using strategy to keep enough players on the floor. He then taught at Lakeville High School in St. Joe County and Middlebury High School in Elkhart County. Irv Pratt became the athletic director, physical education teacher, cross country, golf and basketball coach at the consolidated Northridge High School in Middlebury. He also started a football program. While at Northridge, his 1975 basketball team became the first Middlebury high school to win the Elkhart sectional. In his coaching career he garnered 371 wins and 266 losses. He retired from coaching in 1985 and as athletic director in 1990.

Throughout his years of coaching and teaching young Hoosiers, Irvin Pratt was a role model for integrity, hard work, and Christian living. He demanded clean-cut living and 110% effort. However, he did not believe basketball should consume a boy's life. Practices never exceeded two hours and fifteen minutes: thirty minutes running, thirty-five minutes fundamentals, twenty minutes shooting, and then "plain hard work and sweat." If the players worked hard and became fundamentally sound, they would "win their share of games." Coach

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Pratt taught teamwork and self-discipline and infused his teams with competitiveness and passion. Under Coach Pratt, many players excelled – even set records. Some have pursued coaching or athletic director positions. More importantly, he was mindful that each year provided a chance to have a positive or negative influence on the lives of youth as he helped boys become men.

If action reveals a hero, as athletic director, he understood the need for equality in sports. Long before the IHSSA included girls in high school sports and Title IX, Irvin had been setting up full basketball and track schedules for girls.

If honors reveals a hero, in 1973, Irvin Pratt was honored as an Outstanding Secondary Educator of America. For the 1974-1975 school year, the Ball State Alumnus Association named him “Coach of the Year.” He was also recently nominated for induction into the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame.

If family life reveals a hero, then this man should be honored, for my grandpa has always been a larger-than-life hero to me. He makes our family gatherings fun and filled with laughter. He listens to us with his arm around us and gives everyone pointers about the game of life. I never saw him coach, but I hear the legendary stories. The long lines of cars that followed the team’s and fans’ buses, the former manager who brings a ham every Thanksgiving, the freshman, pulled up to varsity, who was yanked out of the game and asked, “Do you know the offense you’re to be playing out there?” and his answer, “Gee, no Coach, but it’s sure not working.”

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Each Christmas our family watches *Hoosiers*, and I realize that the man sitting next to me lived the Hoosier basketball life, and the boy grown older still believes in the Indiana dream of barn ball advancing to the State Championship. A God-fearing man, my Grandpa has lived a life of example and mentorship, helping to better the lives of those around him. In the ways that truly matter; by how he raised his family, how he lived his life, and the countless people he influenced, he is a hero.