

Cam Henderson: Local Hero

C. Robert Barnett

Marshall University

Eli "Cam" Henderson ranks eighth among college basketball coaches with 611 wins in 36 seasons. His 1947 Marshall College basketball team won the NAIB (now NAIA) national championship. In addition Henderson's football teams won 151 games and played in the 1948 Tangerine Bowl game. An innovative Coach, Henderson invented the zone defense and perfected the three man fast break.

He is a local legend in Huntington, West Virginia the home of Marshall University. The former president of Marshall wrote Henderson's biography and the schools 10,000 seat basketball arena is named Henderson Center. Yet outside of that small area Henderson is virtually unknown.

Henderson was born in Joetown in central West Virginia in 1890. He attended one room schools until he was seventeen and was sent to Waynesburg (Pa.) Academy where he first played organized sports. He graduated with a normal certificate from Glenville State Normal School and a B.A. degree from Salem College.

He began coaching basketball in the small rural high schools of central West Virginia. He invented the zone defense in 1914-1915 when a wet floor made guarding a man too difficult, and instead Henderson assigned each of his players to a zone of the floor.

Henderson coached two years at Muskingum (Ohio) College before becoming the football and basketball coach at Davis and Elkins (West Virginia) College in 1923. Henderson's teams traveled far from Elkins to play major powers, but were unbelievably successful. They lost a close game to Army in 1925 and defeated Navy and West Virginia on successive weekends in 1928.

The financial depression of the 1930's forced Davis and Elkins to de-emphasize sports so Henderson moved to Marshall College, the second largest school in West Virginia.

Henderson's success continued. His Marshall football teams were noted for their hard-nosed, disciplined play, and his basketball teams played a high speed, fast-break game. His twelve season Marshall football record was 68-46-5 and his twenty season basketball record was 361-116. His 1947 basketball team won the NAIB national championship with a 73-59 win over Mankato (MN) State, but his football team lost the 1948 Tangerine Bowl 0-7 to Catawba (NC) College. Henderson retired following the 1954-55 basketball season. He died a year later.

Henderson fits the heroic role as defined by both B. H. Lehman and Orrin Klapp. He also personified the Appalachian values of thrift, hard work and stoicism. He was a local hero because he had combined general and regional heroic attributes. But his stoicism caused him to dislike sportswriters.

Because he coached far from the national and even secondary media centers, and generally disliked publicity he was unknown on the national level and remains only a local hero.