



A 15-Cent Education

By Rob Fournier, esq.,
Director of Athletics

Back when I was a very young, there was a survey that reported the most trusted person in America was Walter Cronkite. For those reading this article who are under 50, Walter Cronkite was the long-time evening news anchor for CBS. He delivered the national evening news for thirty (30) minutes each night (actually somewhat less than that when you factor in the commercials).

Quite a contrast from where we are today. I read the other day (20 September 2020), that only nine (9%) of Americans had “great trust” in the media. Quite a drop. But why do you think that has happened? I don’t think it was because Mr. Cronkite had some kind of special charm or an aura of trustworthiness about him. What you did get was the news – no opinion. Not until he had retired did he disclose his political inclinations. What the editors of the broadcast, and Cronkite himself knew (he wrote most of his own copy), Americans put an emphasis on truth – nothing new there right? Once you had the factual information, the part that makes us a democracy kicked in – you had to figure it out and what it all meant. I guess today some people don’t think we are smart enough to figure it out. Worse yet – maybe today some don’t want you to.

Interestingly looking back, somehow America *was able* to figure that out – of course that earlier USA resume reflected that this country had already done pretty well figuring out things in the past. Saving democracy in World War II, and halting the spread of totalitarianism and communism, is pretty good “documentation” of that understanding of the world. Surprisingly, according to the US Census in 1970, only ten percent (10%) of the population had a college degree. Basically, ninety percent (90%) of people in America had not completed college ... and I knew one such man who had not even entered high school.

All of that made me reflect on that period and a youthful memory of that time. My Dad used to get up pretty early in the morning (he had *to be at work* by 5:30 AM) so, needless to say, I often did not see him leave each morning. But on Saturdays, that schedule was somewhat different, and I would catch him in our kitchen. Back then we had two daily newspapers – one printed in the morning and one in the afternoon. There was no cable news – as a matter of fact our black and white television got only two stations (for some reason ABC did not come in). But we had newspapers.

Anyway, on Saturdays we had a morning routine where I would go and get



the paper. I always remember him reaching into his pocket full of change and he would hand me 15 cents (well there might have been an extra quarter or dime in there too) to pay for the paper which was all of a nickel and a dime.

I would then run down to the newspaper stand carrying the 15 cents in my hand for some reason fearful that if I put it in my pocket, I would lose it. Clenched fist, I would get to the newspaper stand which was simply a metal frame box with both sides open. No levers to pull, no coin slot to drop money into, no enclosure. You could just reach in and take one out. The money went into a little coin container which you could just as easily put coins in as you could take them out. It was an honor system – the publisher trusted the customer to take one paper and in return pay 15 cents. I can vividly remember always making exaggerated motions showing I was dropping coins in and taking out a single newspaper. No one was watching ... but somehow, I was fearful that I might be accused of some nefarious act that involved a 15-cent newspaper. High crimes. Paper

in tow, back I ran the four/five blocks. It was a little more challenging in the snow, but I always "pretended" I was running with a football in an open field. And for some reason ... I never got tackled.

Mission accomplished; I would get the sports section ... that did not seem as interesting to my Dad. Over time, he encouraged me to read the opinion section of the paper. That was a little more challenging than a box score. Twitter with only 280 characters would not have worked to tell those argumentative positions – but you also got to read the entire opinion regardless of who might like (or dislike) it. And I read a lot of opinion articles – William Safire, David Brooks, Carl Rowan, Andy Rooney and some that had a more humorous commentary – Art Buchwald and Erma Bombeck (who I still remember once wrote in an article that there are three numbers a woman never forgets – her social security number, the number of hours she spent in "labor" and her hair dye color). Funny the stuff you remember.

But they were all opinions – it said it across the top of that newspaper section in case you had wandered in there by mistake, and not by coincidence, it was also clearly separated from the other sections of the newspaper. Actually, it came last in the newspaper – must be something about opinions.

Relationships are built on trust ... and the best ones have that as their foundation – be it as a spouse, an employee or a friend. And once that deteriorates, there is not much left. I thought about that old newspaper stand. And contemplated for a moment, could such a transactional exchange exist today? There were thirteen houses on that street where I grew up and I knew the names of everyone in each house. None of the men on the street wore a tie to work, some had families, while others lived alone and some practiced different faiths and beliefs. Each could get that same newspaper – just reach in and take one. No one watched if you paid. But that honor system must have worked, because for years it operated the same way – in that hard-working, non-college educated, neighborhood. Trust.

If people do not trust you ... you should ask yourself that difficult question ... Why? Walter Cronkite used to end each of his broadcasts with a tag line. "and that's the way it is ... " Well, if it is not the way it should be, or how you would want it to be, you might start with building some trust back. I guess I would say – trust me on that one ... even if it is my opinion.

This article is one from Rob Fournier's upcoming book "A Journey That Had A Stop At Wayne State."

Are You A Booster?

Want more information?

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We want to remind you of what is acceptable when dealing with our current and prospective student athletes. First, it is important to determine if you must follow the rules surrounding a representative of athletics interest.

You are considered a "Representative of Athletics Interest" or "booster" if you:

- Are or have been a member of any organization promoting Wayne State University Athletics.
- Have ever made a donation to the Athletic Department or any booster organization.
- Have ever assisted in evaluating or recruiting prospects.
- Have ever helped to arrange or have provided employment to enrolled student-athletes, prospects, to their parents or relatives.
- Participated in a Wayne State athletics program.
- Once you become a representative or athletics interests, you retain this status FOREVER.

Please keep in mind, it is possible to jeopardize a student-athlete's eligibility with just one act of kindness! Please ask before you act.

In the end, the Game was Only a Small Part of It

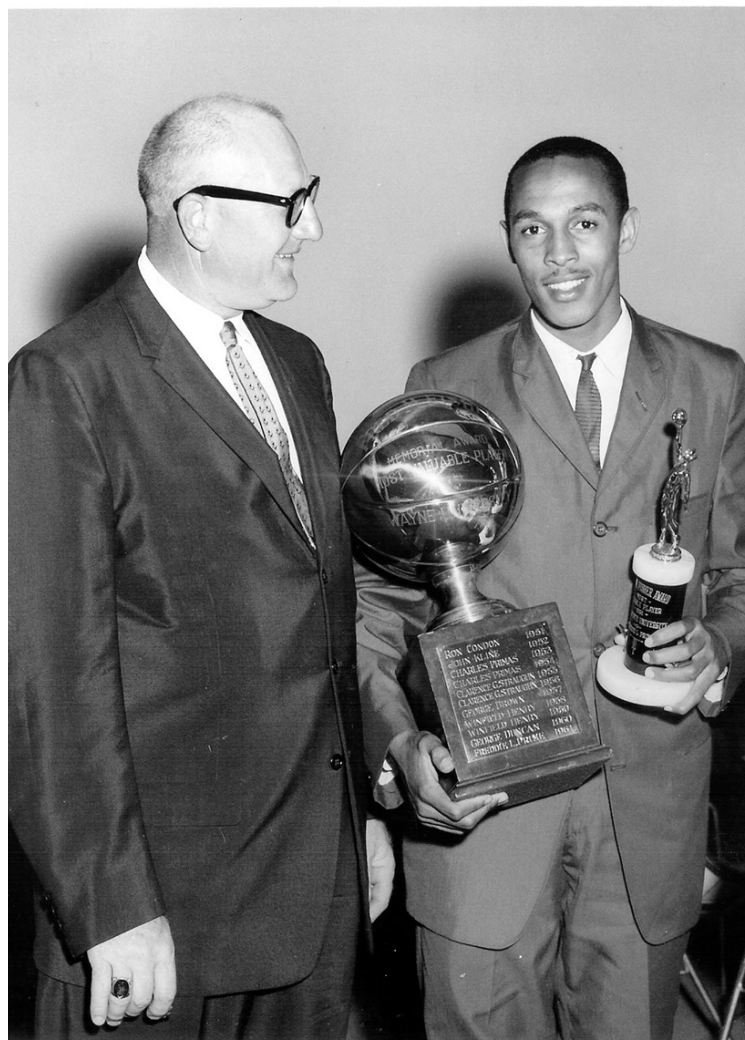
By Rob Fournier, esq., Director of Athletics

Back then, they did not offer a class in diversity. There was not a webinar to explain the value of integration and the advantages of a common community. And “implementation” did not require a legal mandate as was the case with the Little Rock Nine or Brown v Topeka Board of Education. By comparison, what unfolded in the athletic department at Wayne State was as uneventful as the rising of the sun ... but just as significant. Now, over one hundred years later, that early epiphany for Wayne State athletics has made it unique in the history of intercollegiate athletics. What was that distinction?

You see when they first started an athletics program at then the Detroit Junior College (precursor to Wayne State University) the athletic teams were integrated. Athletics at WSU respected individual rights long before anyone called it civil rights. And they did it together. That’s the way it should be. The very first athletic teams (football, basketball and track) had both African Americans and whites as teammates. To give it perspective, that was 1918. Women had not yet *been granted the right to vote* and yet Wayne State athletic teams had young men of different color as teammates ... working together, competing together and, along the way, learning about each other - together. It has not changed. That is the legacy of the athletic program. That is our teaching classroom. You won’t find that distinction in the history of many college programs. And along the way that inclusiveness has changed many lives ... and opened the eyes of others.

Detroit has long played a role in changing the landscape of America – from work opportunities, to fair wages, to racial upheaval, to the Arsenal of Democracy. And it was no more evident than in basketball at Wayne State. It is a program steeped in history that defied societal injustices in an open setting with young men not just navigating a basketball court but the roadblocks of prejudice.

Back in the 1955-1956 season, the Tartars were selected to play in the NCAA basketball tournament. Today’s “Big Dance”. To underscore just how impressive those Tartar teams were, they beat DePaul in the opening game of the tournament to advance to the “Sweet Sixteen” against the University of Kentucky. It might be argued that the integrated Wayne State basketball team back then representing “the freeways of Detroit” may have been a foreshadowing for the movie “Glory Road” that told the story of the all black University of Texas at El Paso team that won the NCAA national championship in 1966. Interestingly, that integrated Wayne State team suited up against another all-white team from that same Lexington, Kentucky, institution some 10 years earlier. Those teammates from that 1956 team had some vivid recollections of that game played in Iowa City, Iowa, including some questionable calls against WSU star George Brown forcing a game-altering substitution for the key player. But even more unforgettable, if not unremarkable, was the halftime exhortations of the opposing head coach who injected a few racial slurs into his comments to his team as they trailed WSU at the break. The Tartars in the nearby locker room separated by very thin wallboard were stunned by the goading –



Coach Joel Mason with WSU Basketball Player Freddie Prime.

so much so that their reunion some 50 years later they still recalled the incident. A different time.

As much as that success seemed to predict what was to come, the next season when Wayne State again qualified for the NCAA Tournament, they declined the “invitation”. To this date, Wayne State remains the *only team ever* to be invited to what is now the Division I NCAA postseason basketball tournament to “decline” that opportunity. That success was not isolated. In the 1952 season, they were ranked in the *Associated Press* Top Twenty in the country – the standard long before ESPN and NCAA Selection Committees. They had built ... and were building upon, a powerhouse and in that “house” were faces of different colors.

Unfortunately it all changed abruptly. It was reported, then President Hilberry thought such diversions would take away from the students’ studies. Not sure if the student athlete current *overall* grade point average of 3.43, or the fact that *every team* has a cumulative grade point average of not less than 3.17, would have changed his mind. His predecessor David Henry also had the program withdraw from the newly formed Mid-American Conference it had

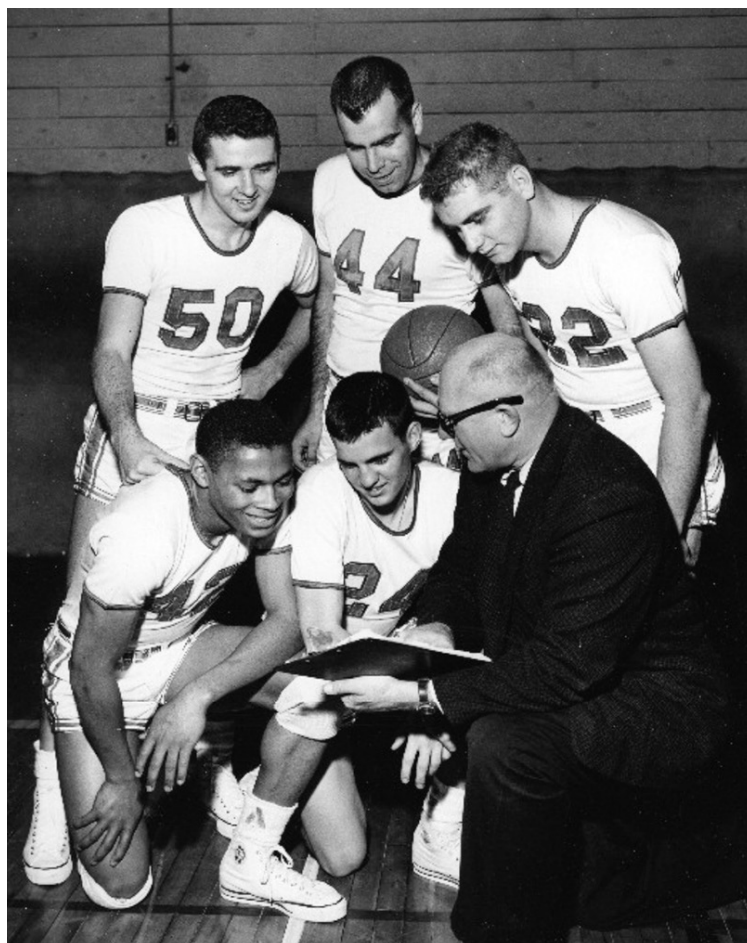
joined as a charter member claiming it did not emphasize academics. In a strange coincidence, as Wayne State partners with the Detroit Pistons to build their *first ever* basketball arena, the University on the other side of campus is building the Hilberry Theatre.

Although some might question the marriage of athletics and academics, there is no denying the simple lessons of social justice that are woven into the fabric of intercollegiate athletics – a foundational truth not as universally apparent so quickly elsewhere. The ideal of America has its perfect reflection in the imagery of athletics that includes the transformational likes of: Jesse Owens, Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson. Likewise, those early Tartar teams embraced those same beliefs long before others opened their eyes, opened their minds ... and unfortunately in many cases, even a little more slowly, their hearts.

One of those early head coaches/teachers was Joel Mason who guided the Tartar Basketball teams from 1948 – 1966. He had been a football coach and played professional football for the Green Bay Packers, albeit as the secondary wide receiver opposite NFL Hall of Famer Don Hutson. The talent that Mason blended was so dominate that four Wayne State basketball student-athletes went on to play for the Harlem Globetrotters when opportunities for blacks in professional basketball were at least tacitly restricted under the “two-fer” understanding – no more than two blacks per roster. To best illustrate that point, one of those like college students who was impacted by that unwritten edict was a young man named Wilt Chamberlain who gave up his senior year at the University of Kansas to play with the Harlem Globetrotters while awaiting a chance in the 1959 NBA draft. You could certainly make an argument, that Tartars: Charlie Primas, George Brown, Johnny Kline and Ernie Wagner, all of whom played for the Globetrotters, and with whom two played with Chamberlain, might have been the greatest basketball student-athletes to ever play at Wayne State.

But it was more than a basketball game. Here is how the story weaves together like a basketball net that realizes success when the ball passes through it. Mason’s objective was more than young men moving through a basketball program. It wasn’t just the ball through the net ... but what those young men became after they left the court. And that has not changed under Coach Greer or Coach Lohr. Mason was acutely aware of 20th century America and was preparing young men for bigger lessons than jump shots and rebounding. Unfortunately, too many even today overlook and dismiss those simple lessons played out daily in intercollegiate athletics.

Mason was not oblivious to the segregation his team confronted. He just chose not to accept it. If they could not find lodging at the local hotel, they bunked at the YMCA or a fraternity house. If they were refused service at restaurants, they went somewhere else. Years later when those teammates reunited, those simple lessons were not lost upon them ... and it helped guide them through their own individual confrontations with racism, and importantly, it was a learning tool *for every* member of the team. Impressionable young people who played the game of basketball at Wayne State left with a year-long seminar in life – and it carried to others. They did not apologize for skin color that they could not change. But they could change how others viewed that color. Mason’s unyielding approach did not mean compromise. If the team



Coach Joel Mason with players of the 1958-59 team.

could not dine or sleep together, then there would be no exceptions even if that meant traveling further or questionable food options.

The late Charlie Primas recalled for me some of those experiences’ years later. Building blocks that were learning tools in his personal journey. “We were from Detroit. Heck many of us had not even traveled outside the City. It was different ... but together we felt safe and we knew our coach was with us. Funny, I realized later, that not everything I witnessed was intended for us ... some of it was for a larger audience.” He reflected upon that lesson when he recalled winning the Indiana State Holiday Tournament in December of 1951 in some difficult circumstances. As Charlie pondered on that moment so many years later, he had already come to realize the moral from that moment was not meant entirely for him, or his teammates, but instead the larger on-looking crowd *who were not wearing Wayne State jerseys*. Mason was teaching without a classroom, without notes, but with an agenda. He was teaching all of us. We need more of those lessons.

“Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have the exact measure of the injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them.” - Frederick Douglass

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