

By Randy Whalen

Sometimes the term "legend" is overused.

Not in the case of former Lockport Township boys basketball coach, Bob Basarich.

Under Basarich, Lockport basketball thrived for over two decades. Basarich passed away on Monday, Nov. 7, 2022. He was 89 and lived in Frankfort.

In a time when high school basketball was king in the town, Basarich brought a disciplined, old-school style and would go to great lengths to get his point across.

"One time we didn't beat Romeoville by enough points," former player Scott Parzych recalled of a game during the undefeated Class AA State Champion Lockport boys basketball season of 1977-78. "So we had a practice on their court after the game."

That illustrated the tenacity that the former Lockport boy's basketball coach would have in preparing his team to win. Basarich was known, not only in this area but throughout the state as one of the top strategists in the sport.

He was survived by his wife of nearly 63 years Anna M. Basarich (nee Prince), and son Bradley (Cheryl) Basarich; preceded in death by parents Daniel and Rosemary Basarich. Born in Chicago, Bob graduated from Proviso East and then joined the army. After that, he attended and graduated from Illinois State, where he was captain of the Redbirds' 1958 golf team. He received his masters from Indiana State University.

Funeral arrangements were private and no public services were planned at this time.

"My dad was a unique person," Brad Basarich said. "When I was little he would tuck me in at night and tell me crazy stories with things like the Three Stooges. But it worked and I fell asleep.

"I can't believe he's gone. When I was growing up I remember always going to his basketball games and practices. There was no monkeying around. He was dedicated and passionate about his career and Porter basketball. He gave 100 percent all the time."

Brad, 56, had some exciting experiences, especially during the state championship season.

"When Lockport won the state I got to go on the Ray Rayner Show with him and it was awesome. I never had a dull childhood, there was always something going on.

"I appreciate everything everyone has said about him since he passed. It means a lot to me and my mom."

While Bob Basarich last coached on the court over 35 years ago, his impact is still felt in Lockport and beyond.

"He meant so much to so many people," Terry Green said. "He coached my older brothers, Chester and Alvin too. Coach was still in my life and I had talked to him a few months ago about getting together."

Green, a 1979 Lockport graduate, who went on to play at Northern Illinois University, helped the Porters to the undefeated state championship as a junior and an elite eight berth as a senior. He remembers the things Basarich did off the court even more than the times on it.

"He was a lesson man who definitely preached perseverance," Green said. "In high school, he gave me a schedule book and I still have it. When we won the state, a local church (Lockport Missionary Baptist Church) gave us all a bible and I still have it. It's just the memories. He taught us more than basketball, that's for sure."

Basarich started his coaching and teaching career in the fall of 1958 at Kelvin Grove Junior High in Lockport before getting a job at the high school. He coached Lockport's freshman boys basketball team for three seasons, going 71-10 from 1963-1966 with a 26-0 team in 1964-65.

He was a physical education teacher from the time he was hired until the early 1970s when he moved to the cooperative education department. Also coached freshman football in 1964. His first state coaching success came in golf, as he guided the 1966 Lockport boys team to a second-place finish. That was the Porter's first state trophy in any sport. Basarich remained as varsity golf coach for several seasons.

In November of 1966, he started what would be a 21-year journey as head boy's basketball coach at the school.

His teams won 20 or more games 19 times, and the other two years they were 18-8. He won 15 regional titles, including eight of nine between 1972 to 1980, seven sectional championships, and two state trophies, finishing fourth in Class AA in 1973 and capturing the AA championship five years later. He finished with a record of 496-99 and his teams between 1977-80 went 88-4.

His 496-99 record was a .834 winning percentage. Only one other coach with more victories has a better winning percentage, King's Landon 'Sonny' Cox (.850).

When he retired, Lockport was tied for second in consecutive conference wins with 71 and third in consecutive winning seasons with 27. The Porters also ranked fourth in consecutive 20-win seasons with 13, tied for seventh in consecutive victories with 44, and seventh in consecutive home wins with 42. He also had a run of 40 consecutive road wins during his career as well as streaks of 36-and 33-consecutive wins in home games.

He led the 1977-78 team to the Class AA title and a 33-0 record, joining Taylorville (1944), Mt. Vernon (1950), Lyons Township (1953, 1970), Marshall (1958), Collinsville (1961) and Thornridge (1972) as the eighth unbeaten champions at the time His program posted a 78-0 record at all levels during the 1977-78 school year. Lockport won 16 conference championships, 12 in the Illini-8 and four in the SICA West.

Basarich was a two-time Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Coach of the Year in 1973 and 1978. He was an original board member of the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association and a 1979 inductee of the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association for his coaching career and his 1977-1978 Class AA state champions were inducted in 1984. He coached 1968 All-American Jeff Hickman, a 1973 inductee in the initial class of the IBCA Hall of Fame, and Parzych, a 1978 All-American and a 1983 IBCA Hall of Fame inductee.

He was also a Joliet Area Sports Hall of Fame inductee also was a longtime financial advisor in addition to his teaching and coaching duties at Lockport.

Parzych, who went on to play at North Carolina State and then played professionally overseas, knew his former coach wasn't the easiest person to play for but he got results.

"Bob was Bob," Parzych said. "He was tough to play for and it was all business. He knew what he was doing. and he motivated by not saying nice things. But his statistics speak for themselves. He was worth five or six points before we even tipped off. Everyone knew we would play a 1-3-1 defense but that didn't matter. Plus, it was worth another five or six points when we were at home. (Lockport went 230-29 in home games, a .888 percentage, in 21 seasons, and 223-25 at Lockport gym, a .899 percentage in 20 seasons). The whole community was involved. So playing at home was worth 11-12 points.

"After high school, he would always keep in touch. I would tease him a little more as we got older and we would laugh. You didn't dare do that when you were younger but you could later in life."

Parzych recalled the feeling the two had following the 64-47 victory over St. Joseph in the 1978 Class AA state title game.

"He and I were the last two out of the locker room," Parzych said. "Bob asked me how I felt and I said 'I was relieved. Especially after all we had been through.' Then Bob looked at me and laughed and said 'it feels great to me.' He was actually happy."

Current Joliet Central boys basketball coach, Lawrence Thompson, who was the head coach for the Porters for 16 seasons from 1999-2015 and won three straight sectional titles between 2006-08, was happy to get his start coaching under Basarich.

"I was just six months out of Lewis University and my first job was the freshman boys basketball coach at Lockport," Thompson said. "I was just a young man who wanted to be a basketball coach. I played for Chuck Schwarz at Lewis and both he and Bob were intense disciplinaries who wanted things done the way they wanted them done.

"That helped mold me into the coach I am now and comes out in the way that I want to coach and teach."

Now in his seventh season as coach of the Steelmens, Thompson continues to use those lessons from Basarich.

"I was his varsity assistant coach between 1983-87," Thompson recalled. "There was a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff where he helped me to be as driven and as demanding as I needed to be. Bob would be that parent type and know what each kid needed in the team concept. He knew what he wanted for the team."

Someone else who has a unique perspective on Basarich is former Mike O'Connell. A longtime successful head basketball coach in the area, at Joliet East, Joliet West, and later at Joliet Township, O'Connell had the experience of playing against a Basarich-coached team in high school and later coaching against him.

"My first memory is from 1969 my senior year (at Joliet East) when Lockport beat us by one point in the regionals," O'Connell said. "After the game as I went to shake his hand, he grabbed me, put his arm around me, and said 'You played one heck of a game.' In the 70s I was a lower-level coach at Joliet East. When the opportunity presented itself I would approach different head coaches and pick their brains. Bob was always talkative and willing to share his ideas."

Joliet East was a school between 1964-83. In that span, the Kingsmen never defeated Lockport in boys basketball. O'Connell was head coach the last two seasons there before becoming a successful head coach at Joliet West (from 1983-93) and two seasons (1993-95) as head coach of the combined Joliet Township team. His squads won seven regionals, and four sectionals made a pair of elite eight appearances and placed fourth in Class AA in his final season.

But in his six seasons of coaching against Basarich, O'Connell never beat him.

"As a head coach, one story sticks out," O'Connell recalled. "We are playing at The Pit (the nickname for the old gym at Lockport Central) and Joliet West and Lockport were among the best teams in the area. I think it was the 84-85 season. The IHSA had instituted a rule that the coach had to stay seated. It was a hotly contested contest. A crucial call went against Lockport. During the dead ball, Bob Marched onto the floor and was giving the refs a piece of his mind. I was calling for a technical but to no avail.

"So I decided to walk out on the floor. The next thing I know one of the referees demanded that I get back on the bench or get a technical. I pointed at Bob and said 'what about him?' The ref replied 'once you win over 400 games, you can come out here.' The ref put me in my place."

Rich Kolimas, who is in his 22nd season as the only head boy's basketball coach in Lincoln-Way East history, developed a friendship with Basarich.

"Coach Basarich was a legendary coach in Illinois, known for his 1-3-1 zone and his gruff demeanor on the sidelines," Kolimas said. "When I moved to this area, I was able to talk to him frequently. What I came to discover was how much he enjoyed the comradery of coaches and former players. He loved basketball, and he loved the banter with those who shared his passion."

Gerry Barbeauld, a star forward on the Porters 1978 state title team summed Basarich up the best.

"He was a great coach and a straight shooter," Barbeauld said. "He would tell you like it was. I had so much respect for that man.

"Rest in Peace Bob Basarich. You will be missed."