

WPJ “The Time Machine” Article #8
“Mr. Aus Comes to Wadena”

by Jebb Willis – volunteer

Wadena County Historical Society

My father, Harold Willis, ended his nine-year run as the WHS head basketball coach at the conclusion of the 1964 season. The following year the “new sheriff in town” was twenty-nine year-old Melford “Whitey” Aus. The Rugby ND native came by way of Minot State University where he earned his undergraduate degree in physical education. He also played basketball for the Beavers and starred on the 1954 and 1955 conference championship teams. In 1988 Mr. Aus was inducted into the Minot Athletic Hall of Fame

From Minot he went to Grand Forks to earn his master’s degree and to serve as a graduate assistant basketball coach for the UND men’s team. Upon completion of his graduate program, he taught and coached at the high school level for three years before entering the military.

For those of us who remember Mr. Aus you may recall he was a fairly intense individual. In my youth I knew him as his paper boy. I served as a team manager, along with my life-long friend Rick Grewe, on his 1968-69 team. That season my brother Greg was a senior, playing for Mr. Aus since 10th grade. Mr. Aus was the Wadena summer recreation director and ran a basketball league in which I participated. And finally, I had him as a teacher in high school. After graduation, as an adult, I eventually got to know him and to see him in a different light. He was much more relaxed and less formal. He was invited to my wedding, and he attended. However, one thing did not change. He had always been, and until his death, he was always “Mr. Aus” as far as I was concerned.



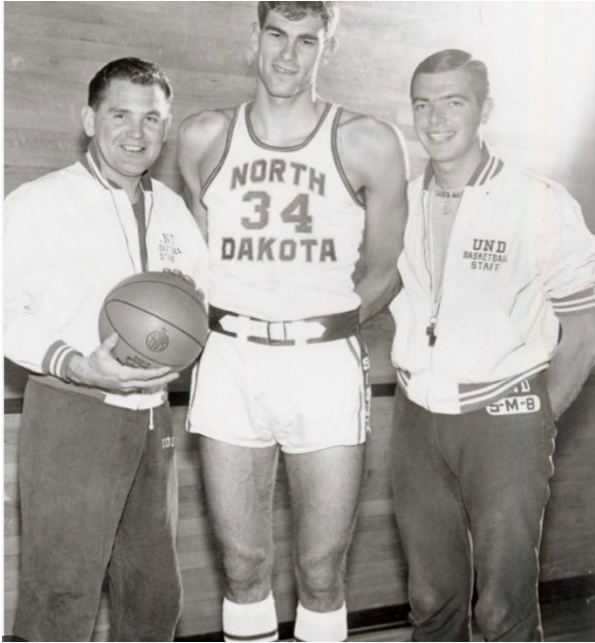
In Aus’ first two seasons WHS made it to the District 24 title games. In both tilts C-I defeated Wadena in low scoring affairs, 43-42 (1965) and 40-38 (1966). Wadena’s teams included the likes of Don Stoneman, Dave Campbell, Brent Grangruth, Tony and Larry Schiller, Jerry Fiskum, Chuck Folkstad, Fran Plautz, Arlen Damlo, Mel Pulju, and Steve Nelson.

At some point before Mr. Aus’ tenure ended, one of his teams gave him a metal clipboard since the compressed wood type seemed to break easily while in Mr. Aus’ possession. I think Chuck Folkstad may have been involved and as I recall Mr. Aus took it all in stride. His time at the helm ended after the 1970 season. Wadena’s next coach would be a youngster from Battle Lake, the new sheriff in town, my high school coach Lowell Roisum. Hold on there, we are not done yet. I would like to end this by dialing back this trusty old “Time Machine” to the two years Mr Aus spent at UND.

I would guess by the time Mr. Aus arrived in Grand Forks he had a “coaching philosophy.” However, as it turns out he would be surrounded by and immersed in greatness for two years. That could undoubtedly have a profound affect on his coaching philosophy for the rest of his career. What am I talking about? Well, let’s review who were the UND head coach, assistant coach, and the star player.

Head coach Bill Fitch is in the NBA Hall of Fame after 25 years in the league and 13 playoff appearances. His lone NBA title was with the Celtics, in Larry Bird’s second season. The ninth winningest coach in NBA history. His college coaching career included a two-year stint with the Gophers, ending in 1970.

Fitch passed in 2022 at the age of 89. He was described in a New York Times article as “a strong-willed figure who preached unselfish play. Fitch ran demanding workouts and did not spare the feelings of even his best players.” Fitch was quoted as saying, “I believe in discipline, and I think it’s the cornerstone of championship teams.” Sounds familiar.



Jimmy Rodgers was Fitch’s assistant coach at UND. You may recall Rodgers was the first head coach for the Minnesota Timberwolves from 1991-93. Long before that he followed Fitch to the NBA as his assistant for many years. While he was also the head coach in Boston from 1988-90, he never won an NBA title in that capacity. He was, however, on six NBA Championship teams as an assistant with the Celtics (3 with Fitch) and the Bulls (3 with Jackson).

Speaking of Jackson, Phil came out of Williston ND to play at UND for Fitch and Rodgers. Upon completion of his college tenure Jackson was selected by the NY Knicks as the 17th pick in the second round of the 1967 NBA draft. He had a 13-year playing career, during which he was named to the NBA All-Rookie first-team, and the Knicks won two NBA titles in the early 1970’s. His post playing days included twenty-three years with the Bulls and the Lakers yielding eleven NBA Championships. As a coach he was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame in 2007.

These are the people who influenced Mr. Aus. I am sure Bill Fitch expected his assistants and players to all be on the same page. As it turned out that was a pretty good page.

Mr. Aus was active in the community as a lifetime member and officer with the Elks Club. In 1998 he was named the Minnesota Elk of the Year. For 20 years he served as the Chair for both the District Hoop Shoot and for the Drug Awareness program. Mr. Aus passed away in 2003 at the age of 67. He was laid to rest in his hometown of Rugby ND.