

Heart failure claims basketball legend

By Bill Knight / El Paso Times

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Don Haskins at a 2006 appearance at the El Paso convention center where he told stories of his life. (Mark Lambie / El Paso Times File Photo)

EL PASO -- Don Haskins, Hall of Fame basketball coach and El Paso's own legend, died in his sleep late Sunday afternoon at his West Side home.

Dr. Dwayne Aboud, Haskins' doctor, said the cause of death was congestive heart failure. Haskins, who had been in poor health the past few months, died around 4:30 p.m. His wife, Mary, and his sons Brent and Steve were at the house. Haskins was 78.

Haskins was a legend in this city and in the world of basketball. He coached at UTEP for 38 years, winning 719 games and, of course, winning the 1966 NCAA championship. He was enshrined into the Naismith Memorial Basketball

Hall of Fame in 1997. UTEP's basketball arena was named the Don Haskins Center in his honor at that time.

Nevil Shed, a member

Don Haskins | 1930-2008



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of that 1966 team, said from his home in San Antonio, "How can you describe a Don Haskins? I'm going to cry a little bit today. Boy did he put a lot of history on this Earth. I love him so much."

Brent Haskins said, "My father was beloved by the city of El Paso and he loved the city of El Paso as well. He was having such a hard time breathing. It was a very sad thing for everyone. But we are relieved that his pain is over. He had a lot of pain, although he never really said anything about it. We all told him we loved him before he passed away. He couldn't speak, but his eyes were open and we knew he knew what we were saying. My father was the most humble man I knew. He was so modest. He never cared about the attention he received."

Andress High School basketball coach Jim Forbes, who played for Don Haskins and served

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as an assistant coach to him, said, "This is a sad day. A lot of people saw him as tough. And he was. But there was a lot more to him than just that. We're all so sorry he's gone. We knew it was coming, but when reality sets in ... he was this tough guy who would walk into a room, walk into a gym and everyone just stopped."

Nolan Richardson, who played on Haskins' first Miner team and who went on to coach Arkansas to an NCAA championship, said, "I was driving from Tulsa back home to Fayetteville when I got the news. This is a big loss for me, a big loss for his family and, by family, I don't just mean Mary and his sons, but for all the kids he touched. There were so many, and they were family, too."

Haskins was born on March 14, 1930, in Enid, Okla. His calf was burned badly as a small boy and his father developed a weight to help him build his leg back to full strength.

Haskins was cut from his first high school team but worked tirelessly and came back to become one of the top players in the state.

He played collegiately for the legendary Hall of Fame coach Henry Iba at Oklahoma A&M, playing for a team that was frequently ranked No. 1 in the nation.

Haskins coached six-man football and boys and girls basketball at Benjamin, Texas, High in 1955-56, coached boys and girls basketball at Hedley High from 1956-1960 and boys basketball at Dumas High in 1960. He came to Texas Western in 1961 and remained in that position

until retiring in 1999.

"You're talking about a Hall of Fame coach here," current UTEP coach Tony Barbee said. "The impact he had on this program and this school is special."

Haskins most recently received national recognition in the movie "Glory Road," the story of Texas Western's 1966 national championship run.

That team, the first to start five African-American players against five whites (from the University of Kentucky), is widely heralded as the team that opened up college scholarships for black athletes in the South and around the nation.

"He did what he did because it was the right thing to do," Barbee said. "Yet he opened the doors for people like myself, an African American, to play the game and become a head coach in the NCAA. The players now may not have felt his presence during the games and practices. But they know how much of an impact he's had on this program. They play in the building that has his name, after all."

The news of Haskins' death traveled quickly around the nation, reaching former players and longtime friends and even some new friends in all corners.

Josh Lucas, who played Haskins in "Glory Road," sent an e-mail: "God bless. It was nothing but a total blessing to have been involved, even for a

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tiny slice. With great honor. Josh Lucas."

Harry Flournoy, a member of the 1966 team who now lives in California, said, "It's a sad day. Not just for the basketball world but for the human race. If there were more men like Coach Haskins, we wouldn't have some of the problems we have. He was a great, great man."

Steve Tredennick, an attorney in the Austin suburb of Round Rock, played on Haskins' first Miner team.

"Coach Haskins would have fit perfectly into a John Wayne character in the movies," Tredennick said. "He had simple but very solid concepts of right and wrong and he taught you to do the right thing with your life. Those lessons were just pressed into us as players in that little arena of basketball practice, lessons necessary to succeed in basketball and lessons necessary to succeed in life. Coach Haskins would never be mistaken for Aristotle or Plato. But that is exactly what he was doing -- teaching those lessons in simple black and white."

Haskins had a long and successful run as a basketball coach at UTEP. He had many opportunities to leave El Paso. But he never did. El Paso became his home. He loved to hunt and fish and tell stories and coach basketball.

He always downplayed his success. Once, after winning his 500th game, he said, "Aw, that's really no big deal. If you stay around long enough, you'll win 500. Now 600, that's a big deal. After winning his 600th game, Don Haskins

said, "Aw, that's no big deal ..."

Togo Railey, who played for Don Haskins in 1966 and returned to El Paso four years ago after a 20-year coaching career of his own, said, "He was a blessing to our lives. His spirit will live on in this town forever. It might be a fishing story or a hunting story or how brutal it was to play for him. But his spirit will live on in all those stories. He loved the people of El Paso."

And now a city is in mourning.

Bill Knight may be reached at bknight@elpasotimes.com; 546-6171.

El Paso Times reporter Gustavo Reveles Acosta contributed to this story.

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