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Love for basketball is Tex Winter's window to the world

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MANHATTAN, Kan. | Tex Winter's son leads the old coach gently into the arena. A basketball game is being played and, surrounded by friends and admirers, Winter is supposed to fit right in.

Ahead, there is Bobby Knight — an admirer. Knight is in town broadcasting the game, and TV cameras hover in front of him. At halftime, he waves Winter over.

Knight has known Winter for years. Coached against him. Studied him. Tried to muddy up his brilliant triangle offense. Well, he knew the old Winter — before the stroke.

As Knight pulls Winter close, he assumes they will talk basketball, maybe relive their days of coaching in the Big Ten, or Winter's years with the Bulls and Lakers dynasties, or the success of his Kansas State teams, which were good enough to land Winter in the National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame this year. Instead, Knight will end up saying something more important.

This is a day to celebrate. It's Tuesday afternoon at Bramlage Coliseum, and the sold-out crowd has just paused to honor the 88-year-old Winter. Students whose parents weren't born when Winter coached at K-State chant his name.

For years, people including Lakers coach Phil Jackson have been trying to get Winter into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass. But Winter can't put a voice to what it means as he awaits his enshrinement to the college hall tonight in downtown Kansas City.

Basketball has been Winter's life, and that hasn't changed. Since he suffered the stroke a year and a half ago, the game is even more essential. All he wants to do is watch it. When teams play selfishly, Winter has been known to kick the TV at home. Still, it's therapeutic.

"It's something he can relate to," says Ernie Barrett, Winter's close friend and a former K-State great.

Since Winter can't express that, it's up to the men he's influenced to do it for him.

Back at the scorer's table, it's Knight's turn. He talks to the camera, trying to explain to a national audience the essence of the white-haired man hunched over to his right.

"Of all the coaches I've known," Knight says, "nobody loved the game more than Tex

Winter.”

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Before Tex Winter became a basketball coach, he spent his days figuring out just how far this world would let him go.

In high school and college, he turned himself into a world-class pole vaulter. During World War II, he joined the Navy and was trained to fly fighter planes.

Winter wanted to test the limits of space, but no matter what he did, he kept coming back to the 94-by-50-foot slab of hardwood that fascinated him as a teenager and grew into an obsession.

Basketball first grabbed hold of Winter when he was 14. He would watch the practices of a local college team, Loyola University, that drilled after school at his high school in Huntington Park, Calif. Tex scribbled notes, tracing the way the basketball moved from side to side and player to player, and he noticed that the passes moved in triangular patterns.

After Winter was discharged from the Navy in 1945, he continued his college basketball career at the University of Southern California. The coach there, Sam Barry, ran an offensive system similar to the one Winter had seen Loyola run. Winter took more notes, preparing for the day that he would become a coach.

His opportunity came at K-State. Wildcats coach Jack Gardner had played for Barry, too, and asked Winter to come aboard as the school’s first full-time assistant basketball coach. By 1953, Winter was running the K-State program with his system, which he named the triple-post offense.

To build a consistent winner at K-State, Winter would have to take down Kansas, coached by the legendary Phog Allen and, during 1957-58, led by Wilt Chamberlain. But Winter wasn’t intimidated. The Wildcats would run his offense, and they’d run it to perfection.

“That was his baby,” says Bob Boozer, the star of Winter’s early K-State teams.

Winter looked at the court and, where some saw lines that confined them, he saw freedom. Limitless movement, controlled by the beautiful geometry in his head.

He would predicate his offense on three players being set up in a triangle — one near the sideline, one near the free-throw circle and one on the low block — with each having 15 to 20 feet of space to maneuver. Any pass could be met with a return pass, and any cut could be rewarded with an easy basket. It all depended on the defense and, when executed correctly, it could feel like flying a plane.

Winter's players had to be smart, and they were, because he drilled them on fundamentals constantly. In his 15 years as head coach at K-State, the Wildcats won eight conference championships and played in two Final Fours.

In the process, his invention developed a cult following. Coaches came from around the country to watch him teach it, including a young Dale Brown, who would later hire Winter to coach with him at Louisiana State.

"Tex is the Rembrandt of basketball," Brown would say.

Winter could have been so many things. A fine amateur architect, he built his family's house in Manhattan with his own hands. As a child, he had been captivated by boxes, collecting them, and nobody really ever understood why. In the end, he fell in love with the box that made the most sense, and a sport would never be the same.

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Tex Winter could have stayed at Kansas State forever, but he did not want to stand in the way of progress. He felt that his top assistant, Cotton Fitzsimmons, was ready to run the program, and Winter wanted to make an impact elsewhere.

One of the reasons Winter wanted to leave K-State was that other Big Eight schools were recruiting players that he deemed marginal students. He relished the chance to coach at Northwestern University, where the nation's brightest could execute his triangle, but there was one major problem: He couldn't recruit enough talent.

As time passed, Winter didn't look like such a genius anymore. He lost in the NBA with the Houston Rockets. He lost at Northwestern. He lost at Long Beach State. And when the Chicago Bulls brought him on as an assistant coach in 1985, he would feel lost for the next four years.

The year before, the Bulls had drafted a player named Michael Jordan out of North Carolina. Jordan had played for Dean Smith, averaging 18 points per game in his college career, which told Winter that Jordan could be a team player.

Unfortunately, Winter would have to wait to find out. Bulls coach Doug Collins simply let Jordan do whatever he wanted. Jordan would score 60-plus points, and the Bulls would still lose. This did not surprise Winter, who basically felt useless.

Finally, the Bulls would promote assistant Phil Jackson to head coach entering the 1989-90 season. Jackson and Winter had talked plenty of triangle during their years as assistants, and Jackson made Winter his offensive coordinator.

Here was Winter's chance, but how would he convince talents like Jordan and Scottie Pippen to run the same practice drills that he was running at K-State in the 1950s? It helped that Jackson didn't make it an option.

“It took probably three or four months before Michael, Scottie and Horace (Grant) actually bought into it,” says Craig Hodges, who played for Winter at Long Beach State and with the Bulls. “I knew what the ramifications were going to be. I knew we would win championships.”

So did Winter, and in Jackson’s second season as coach, the Bulls knocked off the bad-boy Pistons with their “Jordan Rules” defensive strategy and won the first of six NBA titles. Winter had found fame with his triangle in the NBA, but he was still the same college coach at heart. Winning was in the details.

“Tex and I spent hours of time watching film,” Jackson says. “We would discuss and argue the merits of our play and how to become a better team. This time stimulated Winter’s fertile mind about remedies and answers to our team’s problems.”

Along the way, Winter established himself as the one who would challenge Jordan.

“MJ would be going one-on-one,” Hodges says, “and Tex wouldn’t have a problem with telling him, ‘You gotta pass the basketball.’ ”

Jordan now saw the game through Winter’s eyes, the invisible patterns in his head transferred the old-fashioned way. Through repetition, the hard-nosed drilling of proper footwork and spacing, the old pilot had taught the game’s greatest player how to fly more efficiently.

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Tex Winter liked to say that his life was a bubble that was ready to burst at any time.

He’d led an unreal existence. As a college student, he played basketball against Jackie Robinson. He met Chuck Taylor, that man who got rich making Converse All-Star shoes, in the Navy. His basketball teams had toppled many of the all-time greats, and he could easily lose count of the U.S. presidents he’d met along the way.

When Winter arrived in Manhattan in April 2009 for the 1958-59 K-State team’s 50-year reunion, he was still defying time as a consultant to the Lakers. Winter had earned three more NBA championship rings alongside Jackson in LA, his offense opening up the same doors to Kobe and Shaq as it did to Michael and Scottie.

It sure had been fun coaching those world-class athletes, but Winter had always believed that no team had run his offense as well as this group of Wildcats. And as they filed into the banquet room at the Wareham Hotel, they were still in awe of their old coach.

The men, many of them in their 70s, talked about their kids and grandkids. They’d built their families on the same principles of teamwork that Winter had taught them.

“That meant a lot to me in a lot of aspects of life,” says Jack Parr, who was there that night. “People pulling together. It’s a team win when you win, a team loss when you lose. There are times when that is really significant.”

The men relived stories of their triumphs — like finishing the season ranked No. 1 — and when the night came to a close, it was suggested that Winter should pay the tab with some of that Laker money. Laughter filled the room.

“He picked up the bill, too!” Boozer says. “We had a great time that evening.”

The next morning, the men headed home, feeling youthful with memories still fresh. Don Matuszak and his wife were driving to Kansas City to catch a flight to Atlanta when his phone rang. He answered, and shock ran through him.

Boozer was back home in Omaha, Neb., when he heard the news: Tex Winter had suffered a stroke while taking a shower.

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Tex Winter was depressed, and rightfully so. He had lost the ability to speak, and he could not use the right side of his body. Days had passed since the stroke, and the chances of returning to his old life were appearing unlikely.

“He was off the payroll for the first time in 60 years,” says Chris Winter, Tex’s son.

The doctors were worried. Stroke victims, especially at his age, can crawl into a rut and never come out. They wanted Chris to try something, anything, to get a response out of his father. Chris thought about it. Not knowing what else to do, he handed him a sheet of paper and a pen.

“Let’s try diagramming a play,” Chris said.

Winter gripped the pen as hard as he could. He started with a line. Then another, and another. They were a little sloppy, but Chris easily recognized the shapes. Visions of the triangle offense were still darting around his father’s mind.

What good would Winter’s basketball knowledge do, though, if he couldn’t express himself? At least there was a connection, something to make his tired brain tingle.

Speech therapy did not have the same effect. There is a window after a stroke for the victim to relearn how to speak, and his son Brian suspects that Tex’s has now passed. Depending on the day, he can string a short sentence together, but that’s about it.

Six months ago, Brian moved his father from a nursing home in Portland, Ore., to Manhattan, where Winter lives with Brian and his wife in a yellow duplex near campus. Winter receives visits often from his old friend Ernie Barrett, who was the first player

Winter recruited to K-State back in 1947.

Last week, Barrett took Winter to a Wildcats' practice. In some ways, he is still Barrett's old coach. In many ways, he is not. Winter can make a quick comment about rebounding, or defense, or an out-of-bounds play, but he can't identify K-State preseason All-American Jacob Pullen.

"To be very candid about it," says Barrett, 82, "I'm not too sure he understands he's being selected to the hall of fame. I'd rather have a heart attack and die than have a stroke."

On Saturday night, about 75 former players from Winter's K-State teams met with Winter for a celebration at the downtown Hyatt. Bob Boozer was not one of them.

"I'd like to remember Tex as the vibrant guy that he was," Boozer says.

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Tex Winter is in his rocking chair for the night. The Lakers are playing the Bucks, and the game is flashing in front of him on a flat-screen TV.

There's Phil. There's Kobe. He gave them his mind, and it helped make them great. Winter's signed championship basketballs from the Bulls and Lakers sit in shelves lining the walls. The Lakers' 2002 championship ring, which features three triangles to represent three titles in a row, rests on his left ring finger. There's a picture of the first hoop he ever took a shot on, attached to a barn in Wellington, Texas.

It's been a basketball life, and to Winter, it can feel in these moments like it's still going.

The Lakers have the ball. They're getting into the triangle, and the ball moves to Pau Gasol at the free-throw circle. Lamar Odom cuts directly to Gasol's side and takes the ball, moving freely toward the basket for a layup. Two points, just like that.

"That's weakside four pinch," Brian says. "Sideline triangle."

Winter moves his lips up and down. He's wants you to know something.

"Mine," he says. "Always done it. We still do it today."