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A COURT JESTER

DOC CARLSON WAS REMEMBERED MOST FOR HIS ANTICS AS BASKETBALL COACH, YET ALL PITT MEN WERE UNDER HIS CARE | BY EDWIN KIESTER JR.

They called him "The Clown Prince of Basketball" and with good reason. "Doc" Carlson (MD '20) was the University of Pittsburgh basketball coach from 1922 to 1953. The Hall of Famer once had 5-foot, 8-inch guard Bimbo Cecconi perch on 6-foot, 3-inch center Ted Geremsky's shoulders and shoot from there. Nothing in the rule book prohibited his stepladder, Carlson reasoned.

To protest Penn State's newfangled zone defense, which he hated, Carlson had his team remain at their end of the court, dribbling, passing, sitting on the ball, and even dealing cards while Carlson distributed

ABOVE: Doc Carlson and team members pose for a "fatigue curve" demonstration shot.

peanuts to the booing, bored spectators. To some, such antics weren't funny. A Washington & Jefferson rooter once belted him with a furled umbrella.

But Carlson's wild-man image eclipsed his other contributions. As director of the University of Pittsburgh Men's Student Health Service from 1931 to 1963, Coach Carlson always thought of himself as a physician first. He routinely examined sore throats, dispensed aspirin, and sent students back to class with a reassuring pat. But woe to the student who smoked in his presence; he would furiously snatch the cigarette away and stomp on it.

Even some of his stunts carried a health message. Carlson fed his teams ice cream at halftime and during practice. He started the ice-cream diet during the Depression, when he thought some of his players might not be getting enough nutrition at home. He kept it up when it attracted press coverage.

Among his legacies is the "fatigue curve," which is still widely consulted. In this exercise, he taught players to take their own pulses, run all-out in place for 10 seconds, counting the number of steps taken, rest for 10 seconds, run,



COURTESY ZERNICH

The Zernich brothers with their coach. Newly graduated is Mickey Zernich (MD '57). Steve Zernich (MD '46) is shown left; Wallace Zernich (MD '51) is on the right.

rest, and so on for 10 "innings." As the player ran, he took fewer steps, his pulse rate quickened, but each rest rejuvenated him. Basically the fatigue curve showed that the more you did, in the long term, the more you could do.

When the polio vaccine was developed at Pitt, Carlson insisted that athletes be vaccinated, paying for it out of his own pocket. Then he wrote to the administration, proposing that the whole student body be next—"to be held up as an example." In the winter of 1957, 13,695 members of the student body, faculty, staff, and their families were vaccinated. Carlson was among those administering the shots.

Henry Clifford Carlson was born in Murray City, Ohio, in 1894, and entered Pitt as a premed student in 1914. He was an All-American end and football captain. He earned nine letters in football, basketball, and baseball. After earning his medical degree, he became a company physician for U.S. Steel, but by 1922 he was back at Pitt, coaching both basketball and baseball. (He was tired of watching his patients die, he said.)

From the first, he invented new ways to play basketball. He developed the "figure eight" and "continuity" offenses, intricate patterns that kept both players and the ball in continuous motion until a designated player could take a shot. Carlson's teams sometimes passed the ball a bewildering 40 times in the first 30 seconds of a game. "Ninety-five percent of basketball offenses derive from the figure eight," said Clair Bee, a legendary coach at Long Island University.

For 30 years, Carlson's war cry in basketball was "Win 'em all!" but he achieved it only once, in the 1927–28 season. Two of his teams were national champions. As president of the National Association of Basketball Coaches ("They elected me because I could say in 10,000 words what anyone else could say in 200," he said), he helped develop a stable rule book and the forerunner of the Final Four.

Eventually the times caught up with Carlson. He was eased out as coach. Carlson had never liked recruiting and searching out and signing up top prospects had become more and more important. He preferred to take ordinary students from local families, even undersize kids, and mold them, not just into players, but into successful men. One year his whole starting lineup was medical students, all of whom earned their degrees. "He would have been appalled that less than half of basketball players today get a diploma," says Wallace Zernich (MD '51), one of three Pitt med brothers who played for Carlson. (The coach's son, Henry Clifford Carlson Jr., also graduated from the medical school and played basketball for Pitt.)

Carlson stepped down as men's health director in 1963, when the men's and women's services were combined under a new director. It was whispered that his medical skills, too, were out of date. For all those decades, he had been an unmistakable white-coated figure on campus. He made it a point to know every male student—if not by name, by hometown. "Hi, Turtle Creek!" he would address me. (Once this writer and two sniffling friends visited Carlson, hoping for a sympathetic medical excuse from an upcoming exam. He looked at us with a skeptical eye: "If we had you three and two more clowns, we could have a circus. Now get outta here.")

By the '60s, however, students were coming from places like Great Neck and Los Angeles and Bangladesh. It wasn't Carlson's cozy world anymore. A farewell banquet, appropriately, featured six different flavors of ice cream. A few months afterward, Carlson stepped outside his weekend cottage near Ligonier "for some fresh air," toppled over, and died.

When the three Zernich brothers set up a practice in their hometown of Aliquippa, they were guided, Wallace Zernich says, by what Carlson taught them: "He never had individual stars, didn't want one man to stand out. Our practice was built on Doc's principles. Steve [MD '46] was the general surgeon, I was the family physician, Mickey [Michael Zernich, MD '57] was the orthopaedic surgeon. We worked as a team. Just like on the basketball court."

At the close of Freshman Week, an orientation during which throngs of somewhat scared teenage boys from small towns or industrial neighborhoods had been subjected to the terrors of class registration then exhorted to study hard, make their parents proud, and be gentlemanly with coeds, it was time for Carlson's speech. The once wide-eyed undergrads, now senior citizens, who experienced his oratory can recount its ribald parts today. Carlson's podium time was eventually discontinued, because, as Carlson put it, "They decided the old sonofabitch was too vulgar and too profane."

Carlson had a more gentle, avuncular side, too. Once, in the '30s, he had a choice between either buying 10 shares of stock in a growing company at $8 a share, or eight overcoats for his players at $10 each. Carlson unhesitatingly opted for the overcoats. The stock boomed, yet Carlson figured his reward was greater.

And when Steve Zernich was a med student, he practiced basketball until 6 p.m., then waited until 9 for a train home to Aliquippa, studying medical texts in the rail station. His coach boasted of Steve's dedication in speeches, but, Steve Zernich says with a laugh, "He still never excused me early from practice." ■