

FD native's work ethic turns Bettendorf into dynasty

(Bob Brown is a retired long-time sports editor of The Messenger. His work will appear on these pages from time to time).

Thirty-seven years ago he was laying the groundwork of his career, a career founded on the assumption that hard work never hurt anybody and along the way it didn't hurt to be a little hard-nosed, too.

How's this for a schedule for a 20-year old getting an education and supporting himself and his wife?

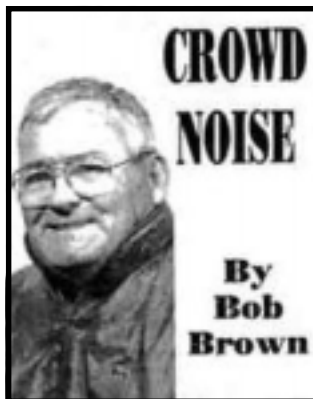
He carried a full load of classes at Fort Dodge Junior College that fall of 1956 and at 3:30 p.m. Monday through Friday he reported to football practice where he starred as guard on the Ford Dodge JC football team coached by the late Connie Goodman. After practice he rushed to the Geo. A. Hormel packing plant where he worked the night shift. At 8 o'clock the next morning his routine started anew.

Certainly that work ethic had a lot to do with elevating Merv Habenicht to the highest level of his profession. Today he's in his 32nd year of football coaching at Bettendorf, the No. 1 high school program in the state of Iowa.

"I was born on the first farm south of Rogers Park," the 58-year-old Habenicht said. "My dad, Harold, is 85 and is still farming. He's about to harvest 120 acres and then get ready to plant again. He never smoked nor drank and he'll probably live forever. He's a tough old bird and I like him a lot," the coach added. Habenicht's mother, May, passed away two years ago.

THE HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL coach has been married nearly 40 years to the former Evelyn Halligan. Her brother, Pat Halligan, was an all-state linebacker and standout wrestler at Fort Dodge High School and later starred as a running back for Buck Starbuck's teams at Iowa Teachers College, now the University of Northern Iowa.

"I don't have much identity," Evelyn said. "The first part of my



life I was the sister of Pat Halligan. Then I became the wife of Merv Habenicht," she laughed.

Habenicht played for Forest Marquis at Fort Dodge High School, then began coaching at Bettendorf 32 years ago under Merritt Parsons. Habenicht has been head coach at Bettendorf for the past 22 years.

INTERESTINGLY, there is a fabric woven through all three men. The late Marquis and the retired Parsons were good friends and each one was one time in his career judged the top active Iowa prep football coach. The fact that Habenicht played under Marquis and learned the coaching craft as an aide to Parsons makes for a tightly-woven trio.

To say the Bettendorf program is the state's best is not a mere stroke of the brush. Habenicht's teams have won five state playoff titles and finished second once. His team has won the class 4A state title the past two years and his 5-6 team is favored to make it a three-peat.

I HAD THE opportunity to renew a friendship with Habenicht in the end zone seats we shared at the Penn State-Iowa game.

"I spent two years in the Army before going to Junior College and we ended up having the first unbeaten team in school history," he said. "I recall some of the other players were Chet Garth, Tom Messerly, Dean Horn, Gary King and Miles Duley. We had a pretty good team."

Dean Horn is an uncle of Minne-

sota Twins baseball star Shane Mack.

Habenicht went from FDJC to Northern Iowa where he played guard for two seasons under the late Stan Sheriff. He graduated in 1962.

HABENICHT HAS developed a bundle of talented football players in his many years at Bettendorf.

Probably the most heralded is Tavian Banks, a fleet running back from the last two years' state championship teams. Banks was sought after by virtually every major college football program in the country after he was named first-team Parade and Scholastic Coach prep all-American. He picked the University of Iowa and is being redshirted this season.

"Tavian is probably one of the fastest football players in America, I think he will be an all-American running back at Iowa," Habenicht said. He had clocked the 185-pound Banks in :04.3 in the 40-yard dash in high school.

"TAVIAN HAS GREAT hands and exceptional acceleration. He could have gone anywhere he wanted. Miami wanted him, so did Notre Dame, Nebraska and Washington. They all put a heavy rush on him and Nebraska was real close to getting him," the coach said.

"He liked Miami but he is basically an Iowa kid and I don't know if he could fit into that fast lane down there. Iowa looked good to him and he liked Hayden Fry and Dave Triplet. He is happy there, he is close to home and that is a factor because his mother is a single parent."

Habenicht said he never ever worried about getting beat with the forward pass when Banks was with his team.

"If the opposition had a good passing game we would put Tavian at the deep safety position and he would take care of it," the coach added.

TAVIAN'S BROTHER, LaVance, and ex-Bettendorf standout Greg Brown are now playing for Southern Illinois. Habenicht said LaVance Banks is being seriously looked at by the San Francisco 49ers as a flanker and punt returner.



Former Fort Dodger Merv Habenicht sits atop the Iowa football coaching heap a head coach at powerhouse Bettendorf High School, which seeks its third straight state championship this fall. Shown with him is his wife, Evelyn. Habenicht has coached No. 1 Bettendorf to 26 straight victories and five state championships.

Former Bettendorf punter, Jeff Nolting, is on the Iowa team also. Two members of last year's Bettendorf champions, Anthony Williams and Eric O'Brien, both defensive backs, are playing at Iowa Central in Fort Dodge this season.

Habenicht has turned out two prep all-Americans and a bushel of all-staters. Aside from Banks, the other all-American is Corey Ryan, 6-7 and 270, who plays tackle at the University of Illinois.

AT BETENDORF, Habenicht doesn't rebuild, he reloads. Playing the spot vacated by banks this year is Ron McQuay, a blistering speed back who carried 17 times for 226 yards and five touchdowns against Davenport North recently. He only played three quarters in Bettendorf's 49-22 victory.

Against previously unbeaten Davenport Assumption McQuay was injured and fullback Paul Harnung took over and ran for 240 yards and four touchdowns in another Bettendorf rout.

"Harnung is a 185-pound fullback and Nebraska is seriously looking at him. He and Ronnie take turns lead-

ing the Mississippi Valley Conference in rushing," said Habenicht.

DOES HABENICHT believe Bettendorf has the top prep football program in Iowa?

We'd like to think we are the top program in the state," he said. "Last year we finished 14th in the nation in the USA Today prep poll and this year we are ranked 8th in the poll of 14 Midwest states."

His dad is one of Bettendorf's biggest fans.

"He comes to all of our playoff games and he still drives himself," said Habenicht.

"He goes down to the Big Three Market (on First Ave. South) and talks football with Sam (Camamo) and the guys quite often."

Can Bettendorf win its third straight title?

"We think there are four teams who can win the state...us, Iowa City, Central Davenport and Assumption," he said. "Whoever gets out of this part of the state will face Iowa City in the playoff."

THERE ARE REASONS for Bettendorf's success under Habenicht. "First it takes tradition. It takes

years to build it, but it can be lost in one year," he explained.

"Our kids have tradition. When they come out for football they don't think of making the team...they think of winning state championships and being all-state and all-American players. They set high goals and they want to be better than anybody else. They work at conditioning all year and we encourage our players to remain competitive and go out for a minimum of one other sport. Competition is the key," he said.

With that attitude, Bettendorf never has a down season. The players just keep coming.

But Habenicht said there is one other factor, other than tradition, that is highly important and that is stability of coaching staff.

"The coaching staff I have now has been with me for 15 years," he said. "I think they are all happy. They are all given responsibility and I let them do their jobs. Obviously, the buck stops with me."

Bettendorf has 1,480 students in four grades. The conference, the Mississippi Athletic Conference, has three teams in the state's top 10 poll. "I really believe Bettendorf, Central Davenport and Assumption could beat anybody in the state," Habenicht said.

Does Habenicht consider himself a tough coach?

"I would say yes...we expect the best out of everyone, on every down. Do that and winning will take care of itself," he said.

DISCIPLINE HAS never been a problem for Habenicht's Bettendorf teams.

"We elect six captains annually, and they act like Sgt. of Arms. Their job is to make the kids toe the mark. I have never lost a kid for a disciplinary reason," he said.

He said the team has no set rules. "Our players are told to be good representatives of our team and our school. We want them to do nothing to disgrace our school or community.

Habenicht's discipline and winning ways certainly have built a dynasty.