

THE "KING"

The true story of Ohio's Winningest High School
Basketball Coach, Dick (The King) Kortokrax.

A book you have to read to believe.

By:
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With the help of family, friends, sports writers, players, coaches and fans...All who helped make this legacy a reality.

A special thanks to Mr. “K” for allowing me to tell his incredible story.

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CHAPTER 1

AT THE LINE...

The sweat was dripping from the corner of his eyebrow down to the side of his face. So many thoughts going through his mind. No time to think now. Just do what you've done so many times before. Bounce the ball, steady it in your hands, bend your knees and shoot it through the hoop.

It sounds so easy, so simple. But everything can change for an athlete when pressure is thrown into the mix

Playing in a state championship for an unranked team, along with the possibility of saving his coach's career, was a little more pressure than most high school kids face. But Jordan Basinger was ready for the challenge. At least, he seemed ready from where I was sitting.

The environment inside Value City Arena in Columbus, Ohio was absolutely electric. A nervous yet enthusiastic crowd of 13,582 filled the arena on a cloudy, brisk Saturday afternoon on March 28th, 2009. So many men, women, boys and girls proudly showing their teams' colors. And hoping their side would prevail as state champs!



It was a match up for the record books. On one side, you had Oak Hill. A small town in rural Jackson County with a population of 1,551. A community of hard working blue collar

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folks who value family, church, community and basketball. It sits about two hours south of Columbus.

Norm Persin was no stranger to coaching the game of basketball. He was nicknamed, “Stormin Norman” because of his no nonsense style of coaching. He was the current head coach at Oak Hill High School. But it was the second time he held that position.

Persin began his coaching career in the 1970’s at Oak Hill. After six years, he left the program to coach Wilmington for two years and then Chesapeake for 21 seasons. The basketball court at Chesapeake is even named after him. Persin returned to Oak Hill to be closer to home. He was in his third year since returning to Oak Hill.

They say, the third time’s a charm and that seemed to be the case for Coach Persin. He led his team to an impressive 24-2 record before reaching this final game of the season. The Oaks were ranked 4th in the state in Division IV. Which is the smallest division for high school basketball in Ohio.

On the other side of the court, you had the town of Kalida. It’s in the complete opposite direction of Oak Hill in the northwestern part of the state. However, it also is about a two-hour drive from Kalida to Columbus.

It’s another small midwestern community almost identical to Oak Hill. The population there, 1,542. Basically, there’s a nine-person difference between the two small towns. The same hard working farm driven mentality etches within that region of Putnam county.

Basketball, most especially, reigns royalty throughout this town. In fact, Kalida High School’s head coach had a nickname of his own as well. He was simply known as “The King.” He just happens to be my father-in-law, Dick Kortokrax. The

Kalida Wildcats were going into this state title game unranked even though they had racked up 23 wins on the season.

Coach Kortokrax separated himself from other high school coaches simply because of his remarkable winning record. On this particular day, he walked into the arena with 785 wins under his belt. Oak Hill's Coach Persin had 575. It was the most combined wins for two coaches in the history of Ohio's high school state tournament. A total of 1,360 wins between them. And these two, along with their embattled teams, were about to face off.

Chances are, most of that information wasn't going through Basinger's mind as he was at the charity stripe. But he, of course, realized the extreme importance of this game. The senior not only wanted to win for his team and his town. He wanted to win for The King. Deep down, he knew this could be his coach's last game ever, and NOT by choice.

I was used to watching high school players shoot free throws. My husband is the head varsity basketball coach at Bishop Hartley High School in Columbus. I rarely miss a game. Through the years, I've noticed how each player has their own style of putting the ball through the tightly braided net.

Basinger was one of the best players on the Wildcats team that year and he was about to do his thing. The Kalida crowd sat on the edge of their seats, not making a sound. I noticed one little boy, about 10 years old, with his hands covering his eyes. He just couldn't watch.

On the other hand, Oak Hill's side had erupted like thunder trying to rattle Basinger's nerves hoping the ball would hit the rim and never find its way through the net. Or completely missing the rim altogether was another option of hope for the Oaks.

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All eyes were on the 6'2" forward. With 1:07 left on the clock, the junior stepped to the line and within an instant, the ball left his hands.

At that point, no one heard anything. No one seemed to take a breath as the ball sailed through midair heading straight to the hoop that was planted ten feet up from the floor of Value City Arena.

CHAPTER 2

ONCE UPON A TIME, A LEGEND WAS BORN

With one swift slap, Richard Louis Kortokrax let out a high pitched cry that seemed to pierce the air around him. But, for one exhausted new mom, it was the sweetest sound she ever heard. It was August 9th, 1933 in Ottoville, Ohio when God blessed Louella and Leo Korotrax with a son. He was the first born. But he would not be the last. Richard (Dick) soon became the big brother to Mary Anne, Jerry, and Unalee.

For this family, the sun rose early and set late, drifting deep behind the northwest Ohio horizon. Farming was a way of life. At one point, Leo had a 100-acre farm but lost it after The Great Depression. Instead, the Kortokrax family including Dick, his parents and his siblings spent their time tending to 40 acres of crops and livestock.

Everyone, from the oldest to the youngest, had daily chores making sure the family farm was productive and efficient. They didn't have much. But, they had one another and that was enough.

To help support his wife and four kids, Leo had other jobs as well. In the early years, he worked at a manufacturing plant. But, as time passed, he chose a job at a nearby tile mill company and stayed there for many years.

It was a daily grind for all of them, but they weren't alone. Throughout Putnam County, this was a common scene for

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many. To help escape from the grueling and tedious farm life, people often looked for an outlet. The answer, more often than not, was to find something that offered a hint of fun and enjoyment just to break up the long workdays.

It's unclear when exactly Dick picked up a basketball for the very first time. But one thing soon became quite evident. It was more than an outlet. Dick Kortokrax had an intense love for the game and everything about it.

In the late 1940's Dick started playing basketball for Ottoville High School in Putnam County. The same town where he was born. For most players who are handed a team jersey, the anticipation builds until the moment comes when he or she gets to step onto a basketball court to play in an actual game.

That moment for Dick came later than he would've liked. He sat on the bench for most of his junior year. However, you never know when opportunity is going to come knocking.

Another basketball player for Ottoville made the difficult decision to turn in his jersey. His family also had a farm, and he was needed there instead of on a high school basketball court.

When one door closes, another one opens. That was the case for Dick. He was the teammate set to take over that vacated spot. He couldn't wait to show his coach and team that he belonged. He did just that.

Dick's high school coach was a man named Louis Heckman. He was also the high school principal. Dick respected him immensely and worked hard for his coach.

By the time Dick was a senior, he stood 6'3" and was the tallest player on the team. He was the center. That year, Ottoville won the district title, Dick earned First Team League honors and Coach Heckman retired. He left the program with

448 wins. At that point in time, it was the most wins in Putnam County history.

Coach Heckman's final year to wear the whistle received quite a bit of publicity in the local newspaper and so did his winning team and individual players. One man, in particular, paid a little more attention than most. He was the basketball coach at Anderson College in Indiana and he liked what he saw in the tall and lanky Dick Kortokrax

It didn't take a lot of swaying. Dick was given a chance to play basketball while getting a college education and he took it. What Dick didn't realize was that his life was about to change forever.



CHAPTER 3

A WOMAN NAMED DONNA

With a bag slung over his left shoulder, he cautiously opened the door not knowing exactly what would happen next. He didn't have a choice. Dick stepped into the bright morning sunlight peering down the long winding road. It seemed still and empty. The trees lining the roadway barely moved in the light whispering wind. One step turned into another and yet another.

With slight hesitation, Dick pulled his right hand out of his denim pocket. He balled his fingers into a fist and thrust his thumb straight into the air. By now, Dick knew exactly what to do. He had hitchhiked several times before. It was never a question of *what*, but more of *who*? Who would be willing to pick up an oversized man with an intimidating frame? Someone would. Someone always did.

He seemed to be lost in deep concentration with so many thoughts penetrating his mind. Dick almost didn't hear the dark colored car slowly pull up alongside him. The driver rolled down his window. "Where ya headed?" asked a considerate looking man in his 40's.

"I'm on my way home, back to Ohio. A little town just across the Indiana border," Dick replied.

"Hop in. I'm heading that way myself." And, just like that, Dick had found a way back to Ottoville once again. Throughout his college years, Dick hitchhiked home to

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Dick between his parents while home from college.

Ottoville nearly a dozen times. It was the least expensive way to travel. Besides, he wasn't going across the country. The drive from Anderson, Indian to Ottoville, Ohio is a little more than two hours.

Dick opened the door of the car and climbed inside. The two men introduced themselves and started talking about all

different kinds of things. It was an easy, non-threatening conversation. Dick seemed to relax immediately. Perhaps, he was a little too relaxed. He actually fell asleep while riding shotgun in the stranger's car!

The driver didn't quite know what to do. So, he simply let the tall college basketball player sleep. Once the car crossed the Indiana/Ohio line, the man woke up his passenger. He wasn't sure exactly where Dick wanted to be dropped off.

Dick emerged from his slumber and was actually embarrassed for falling asleep. Before getting out of the car at a nearby service station, he thanked the driver for the lift and walked the rest of the way. Dick always enjoyed the days when he was back in Ohio and back on the family farm. But, at this point in his life, he belonged in Anderson.



He was majoring in business and wanted to make a good living after graduation. Dick loved playing basketball for Anderson as well. However, he had no interest in coaching or teaching for that matter. It never even crossed his mind.

But things can change. They often do. Dick and a couple of his college teammates were at a gathering place on campus. It was basically a convenient store that also had a place to sit down and grab a quick bite to eat.

Dick, like most of the students at Anderson, had the menu memorized and knew exactly what he wanted. The waitress came over to take his order. But something was very different about her.

Back then, Anderson was a small, Christian, liberal arts college. There weren't too many strangers walking around

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campus. Each face was familiar. But not this young lady. Who was she? Where did she come from? Dick was about to find out.



Dick in his Anderson College basketball uniform.