

## Famed Flashbacks

### When Hall of Famers from different realms meet

*With a handful of jelly, Crans matches wit and grit with a legend*

By Fred W. Crans

**SCHAUMBURG, IL (May 31, 2024)** – Not every story in this series is just about Bellwether League Hall of Famers – but also how they interact and relate with others. This one is about a Bellwether and a Hall of Famer from another realm. The Bellwether is me. The other Hall of Famer is a guy who grew up in Orville, Ohio -- home of the Riceland golf course and the Smuckers company. His name was Robert Montgomery Knight and his field (or should I say *court*) was basketball.



Fred Crans with Bobby Knight

I met Bob Knight at a conference in Chicago in May 2015. He, along with Lou Holtz (former Notre Dame football coach and subject matter for another article) had been retained to entertain the attendees in an hour-and-a-half long story-telling and tall-tales swapping session. And the people there got their money's worth as both legendary coaches shared stories from their illustrious and accomplished pasts. Both were at times side-splittingly funny and at other times dead serious.

On the hopes that I might get to talk with Coach Knight, I stuffed a few packets of Smuckers jelly in my pockets to give to him in honor of his hometown, but I never thought I'd meet him.

Then, out of nowhere, he stopped by our booth and took pictures with us – a really nice guy – not the ogre he was often made out to be. I got so excited to meet him that I forgot to give him the packets of Smuckers that were in my pocket.

A couple of hours later, as I was going to dinner in the hotel with some of my co-workers, I walked right by Coach Knight as he was preparing to eat dinner. I stopped, introduced myself, remembered the jelly packets I had in my pocket, and offered them to him. He looked at them, chuckled, and said, "Have a seat."

What could I do? I sat down.

For about 15 minutes we exchanged pleasantries, and Knight shared stories about growing up in Orville. Then I made the mistake of referencing something he had said during his talk. During the talk, Knight spent a good bit of time discussing the 1984 Men's Olympic Basketball – the last team comprised entirely of college all-stars. The best-known player on the team was Michael Jordan, and Coach Knight sang his praise to the Chicago crowd. Not unexpectedly, the locals ate it up.

"Coach, I loved your presentation, but there is one thing you are wrong about..."

Suddenly, there it was – the famous Knight glower and the accompanying surly retort, "What's that?"

"Michael Jordan is not the G.O.A.T.," I replied.

"No, **you're** wrong," he shot back. "What makes you think that, and who do **you** think is the best player of all time?"

Some people would have withered from the glaring look alone, but over the years I had practiced this argument so many times I had it memorized.

“Look Coach,” I began. “Nobody can deny that MJ is a truly great player. But he got every benefit of the rules. He got to travel, carry the ball, push people on their butts with a forearm to get a shot and whenever the air direction in the arena changed, the refs would call a foul on someone. He was the best **marketed** player ever, but not the best player. And don’t forget, he was 0-9 in the playoffs before Scottie Pippen got there. He never won a single championship without Pippen.”

Knight was heating up. The bushy eyebrows now came into play to augment the intimidating glower. “So, who do you think is the greatest? LeBron James?”

“There are two answers to that question,” I shot back. “Without a doubt, the most intimidating force ever to play the game was Wilt Chamberlain. He still holds 65 records and if blocked shots and steals had been counted as statistics when he played, he’d probably hold 25 more.”

Pausing for dramatic effect, I closed with, “But the best all-around basketball player of all time was Oscar Robertson.”

For those of you too young to remember, both Wilt Chamberlain and Oscar Robertson played in the early glory years of the NBA. Most young folks don’t think the old timers could play today.

But those young folks would be terribly mistaken.

My answer gave Bob Knight pause. Bemused, he arched both eyebrows. Then he said this. “I asked John Havlicek the same question. *(For those too young to remember, Havlicek is an NBA Hall of Famer who played with Bob Knight at Ohio State and with the Boston Celtics in the NBA during the 1960s and 1970s).* Havlicek told me this: ‘Bob, I played with most of the old-time greats, and I have seen all the stars that have come along since, and the greatest player of all-time is ...

... Oscar Robertson.’

“So, I’ll take his word for it, but I won’t take yours.”

Nobody wins an argument with “the General.”

As I walked away, Knight looked at the chair I was sitting in for a moment.

Fortunately for me, he did not throw it in my direction.

*Fred W. Crans, Bellwether Class of 2020, has more than five decades of healthcare supply chain experience and service in a variety of executive leadership roles that spans military and private-sector communities as well as provider, supplier, group purchasing organization and consultant segments. He currently serves on the Advisory Council of Bellwether League Foundation and as Healthcare Business Development Executive for St. Onge Co. For more, visit Bellwether League Foundation's web site at <https://www.bellwetherleague.org/>.*



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