

## FRIENDS REMEMBER FREDDIE KNIFE

By Kevin Woster, first appeared in the *Rapid City Journal*, November 21, 2005; used with permission.

Somewhere out on the sprawling Cheyenne River Indian Reservation this week, young boys and girls will gather under rusted metal basketball hoops to fire up a tribute to Freddie Knife.

Most will do so unwittingly, of course, hardly aware as they sink their three-pointer or double clutch in the air on a reverse lay-up that a 65 year old man who died Friday at Rapid City Regional Hospital lives on in the very muscle of the game they love.

Freddie Knife will most commonly be remembered as the silky smooth, 6-foot-2 inch forward of inestimable potential who led the Cheyenne Agency Braves to the 1959 state Class B basketball title in Huron, then descended into what some might label the obscure failure of isolation and alcohol.

There is truth in that, but those who knew him best say it hardly tells the real story of Freddie Knife.

"I try to overlook all that other stuff," said 81-year-old Gus Kolb, who coached Knife and his Braves to the 1959 title and maintained a close relationship over the years. "He was such a nice, quiet guy. There were so many outside influences for Freddie. Some of them thought it was cute to give him a bottle and try to drown his sorrows."

But none of those influences or their obvious effects could change the soft-spoken, gentle man who Freddie Knife was at heart, Kolb said Sunday from his home in Mission, Texas. Nor could they diminish the impact Knife had on Native American basketball and the spirit of the reservation people.

With a mesmerizing combination of uncanny instinct and unsurpassed physical skill, Knife did more than help his team win a state title. He elevated basketball on the reservation from a simple exercise in sport to an elegant, cultural art form---- introducing ballet-like moves that are still being imitated, with varying degrees of success, today.

He did things with a basketball that I'd never seen before," Kolb said," He had so many different, tricky moves. Nobody's seen those moves before. And it seemed every night he came up with a new one."

Knife was a shy, slender freshman when Kolb moved from a coaching job at Ree Heights out to the collection of school buildings and a "cracker-box" gym at the Cheyenne Agency along the Missouri River west of Gettysburg. The gym was so small that Kolb arranged to use the gymnasiums in Gettysburg and even Mobridge for most of the Braves home games.

Those moves gave up a substantial home-court advantage, but Kolb didn't believe it was fair to bring teams into a packed gym with a less-than-regulation-sized court. And it didn't matter anyway, he said, because the Braves soon developed a loyal following willing to travel long distances to watch their team play.

"We'd go to Mobridge or Gettysburg, and the Indian people would be lining up outside, waiting for the doors to open," Kolb said," "It really was an enormous following."

The team finished third in the state in 1958. And in 1959, Knife was the most gifted of an unusually talented starting five that included Eugene Red Bird, Robert Mandan, Melvin Bagola, and Chester Condon.

I had five really good ballplayers. They were all about 6-1 or 6-1. They could all shoot and handle the ball. And they were all team players,” Kolb said. “We played a zone press that nobody knew anything about, and it really fouled teams up. Any of my starters could score. And they all did.”

But none scored with the artistry of Freddie Knife, nor could they quite match him in the way he captured the hearts of fans. That showed in the second-round state B game against Plankinton, after the Braves built a big enough lead for Kolb to pull his starters.

“We never liked to run up the score on anybody. My boys understood that,” he said.

But when one of the reserves fouled out, Kolb had to send a starter back in. And the fans began to chant for Freddie Knife.

“They just loved Freddie. And they wanted to see him play, Kolb said. “The whole arena was yelling for him--- the opposing side and everybody. It was fantastic and unbelievable.”

It was also too good to last. Knife’s junior year was his last with the Braves. He turned 20 that summer, passing the age limit by the state to participate in high school sports. Kolb said Knife returned to school for a time the next fall but soon left to travel with a touring Indian basketball team.

“I wanted him to stay here and get his education, but he got paid to play. He went with the money,” Kolb said. “They toured all over the states.”

Knife traveled with that team and also played for a number of years with former Braves’ teammates in Indian tournaments in South Dakota and other states. Keeler Condon, a freshman for the Braves during the 1959 title run, also played with Knife on the independent squad.

Condon, now a 64-year-old tribal councilman for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, remembers now Knife taught him to always pay attention on the court.

“You had to be very careful, because he always knew where you were and could pass the ball without looking,” Condon said. “We were on a fast break once, and I was making a bee line down the floor, and he bounced a pass off my head. We all laughed about that. And it taught me, you better keep your eye on Freddie.”

Condon did that as much as he could over the years. The teammates remained friends and would often get together and remember the good times of the past.

“He sure liked to reminisce. He’d always brag me up to my boys and relatives,” Condon said. “He’d say, ‘Hey, I always wanted to rebound, but you never missed a shot.’ We had some laughs, all right.”

After his active basketball days, Knife would still show up on ragged basketball courts throughout the reservation to shoot with teenagers. And he was a frequent visitor at high school games, where he players almost always knew that the great player was in the stands.

Condon said Knife could have played for any college team. But that wasn’t the path his life was to take.

“If he’d had more help, maybe he could have graduated and played somewhere,” Condon said. “The main thing back then, there just didn’t seem to be any money. With more of a chance, I think a lot of our ballplayers could have made it at college.”

Instead, Knife remained on the reservation and slipped into a far less known or inspirational existence. He worked day jobs as a common laborer, lived with a brother

in a modest house on the reservation on family land, drank too much and showed up in Faith ---typically on foot—when he had some money to spend.

Knife never married, never had a family and never fulfilled the potential that many expected of him.

Even so, he will be remembered for what he did accomplish, Condon said.

“They’re saying already, ‘Well, we lost our legend,’” he said.

Friends, family and those who simply knew of the legend will gather in formal services this week for Freddie Knife as the reservation says goodbye.

“We’ll have a wake for him,” Condon said. “People will get up and reminisce about Freddie.”

But those services won’t end the observance of this legend’s life, imperfect as it was. That celebration will continue across the reservation – on dirt and tile, concrete and wood –whenever young players loft ball-shaped joy at the elevated hoop where Freddie Knife’s spirit will live forever.