



SUNDAY SPECIAL

# FALK HERO

## Galva, Northwestern great retires from Big Ten job

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Fifty winters ago, Rich Falk's prolific shooting filled gyms and lit up scoreboards across western Illinois.

One of just three players in Illinois high school basketball history to score 50 or more points in five games in a season, the shooting guard from Galva High School was the talk of the town.

He went on to enjoy a record-setting career as a player at Northwestern University, where he later coached before becoming an associate commissioner of the Big Ten Conference.

Falk, 67, has spent the past 21 seasons working as the coordinator of men's basketball officiating for the Big Ten and has been the director of the Big Ten Tournament for the past 13 years.

He plans to retire from his position at the end of the school year, but his lifelong love affair with basketball will continue.

"Basketball has been my life," Falk said. "So much of what I've done has been interwoven with the game. Growing up in a small town, family,

church and school were the center of my life. I played football, basketball, baseball and ran track growing up, but I always had a passion for basketball."

Falk had an opportunity to show his appreciation Thursday when he his career was acknowledged at Northwestern's Welsh-Ryan Arena during a break in the Wildcats' game against Iowa.

Director of athletics Jim Phillips presented Falk with an autographed basketball, and as the crowd rose to give him an ovation, Falk got on his knees and kissed the court that has meant so much to him for a multitude of reasons.

### Learning by watching

His uncle, Ernie Nordstrom, worked as an assistant athletics director at Northwestern, and when the Wildcats hosted the 1956 NCAA Final Four at what then was known as McGaw Hall, Falk was offered the chance to work as an usher.

"For an eighth-grader from Galva, that was a pretty big deal. It gave me a chance to watch Bill Russell and San Francisco and one of Bucky O'Connor's great Iowa teams along with

### FALK'S 50-POINT GAMES

Only two high school players in Illinois history — Jeremy Moore of Decatur East Park from 1987 to 1989 with nine, and Voise Winters of Chicago Gauge Park from 1980 to 1981 with six — had more 50-point games than the five Rich Falk had for Galva as a senior during the 1959-60 season.

Here's a breakdown of his top-scoring efforts:

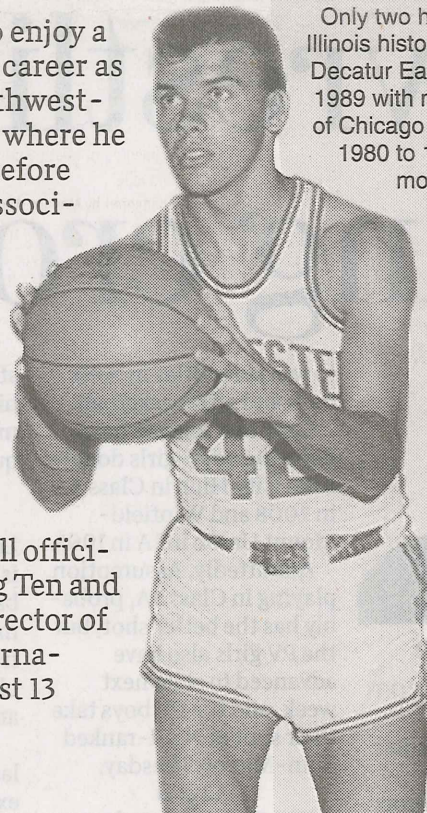
57 vs. Toulon, Jan. 17, 1960

52 vs. Elmwood, Feb. 26, 1960

52 vs. Kewanee Wethersfield, Feb. 19, 1960

50 vs. Abingdon, March 1, 1960 (regional)

50 vs. Manlius, Dec. 4, 1959



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS



# FALK

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Temple and Southern Methodist," Falk said.

"I wasn't any bigger than 5-foot tall and probably didn't weigh more than 90 pounds at the time, but my father always impressed on me that one of the best ways to learn was to sit and watch, which is what I did. I saw Hal Lear from Temple score 48 points and set a record that I would break eight years later. It was an unbelievable experience."

And, it was only the beginning.

Falk averaged 23.6 points during an 80-game high school career from 1957 to '60 at Galva, a number that still ranks eighth in the Illinois High School Association record book.

He led the state in scoring as a senior, totaling 833 points in 28 games. Falk reached 50 points in a game against Manlius on Dec. 4, 1959, a plateau he would reach four more times before the season ended.

Falk totaled 50 points in a regional victory over Abingdon. Two nights later, a Galesburg team led by Bumpy Nixon ended his storied high school career in a tournament game played in a new Galesburg gym. That's where Falk's son, Geoff, later worked his first game as a high school head coach during a four-year tenure that began in 1999.

## Elite company

When his senior season at Galva was over, Falk was named to an all-state team that included Jerry Sloan of McLeansboro, John Love of Ottawa, George Wilson of Chicago Marshall and Bernie Mills of Chicago Dunbar.

"That was pretty good company for a guard from Galva," Falk said. "There weren't any Internet wonders or even much TV at that time. The newspapers in the Quad-Cities, Kewanee and Galesburg got the word out, and that attracted some attention. We played in front of a lot of full houses."

Writing for the Davenport Times-Democrat in 1960, Don White described Falk as "the hottest scorer in western Illinois prep history. Every coach, big school or small, rated him as an outstanding player."

Sharm Scheuerman, then the second-year coach at Iowa, recruited Falk and recalls his skills vividly.

"He was every bit the shooter that Purdue's Rick Mount was, but Rich was probably a more well-rounded player who could do more than shoot," Scheuerman said. "He had tremendous range, though, and he could shoot the lights out. I would have loved to have had him in an Iowa uniform."

Falk said his family ties to Northwestern influenced his final decision, and he went on to letter three years in the sport for the Wildcats.

## RICH FALK ON...

**TODAY'S COLLEGE GAME:** "Great defense and strength gained in the weight room have changed the game. Fans typically don't understand that basketball is a contact sport. By rule, contact is legal as long as it does not give one player an advantage. That is where the officials come in into play. They have a challenging job. It's all about achieving a balance between offense and defense."

**THE BIG TEN TOURNAMENT:** "Our tournament has been competitive. Lower seeds have done well, and I do believe it is preparing our teams and officials well for other postseason play. That was the original intent, and given the number of Big Ten teams that have reached the Final Four or have had good postseason runs, it has fulfilled that objective."

**IF NCAA TOURNAMENT EXPANSION IS NEEDED:** "They haven't asked for my opinion, but if they did I would tell them I don't support it. I think the NCAA has a wonderful event now and I would hate to see them put that at risk. With the exception of the Ivy League, which has no conference tournament, every team has an opportunity to play its way in. There is no perfect situation that will make everybody happy."

## IN THE BOOKS

Even after five decades, Rich Falk still ranks among the state's elite in the Illinois High School Association record book:

■ His career scoring average of 23.6 points over 80 games from 1957 to 1960 ranks eighth.

■ His scoring average as a senior of 29.8 points during the 1959-60 season ranks 14th

■ His five games of 50-plus points ranks as the third-most by any player.

During his career, he established a Northwestern arena scoring record of 49 points that still stands, and it was Falk, playing for the visiting Wildcats, who scored the first basket in the history of Illinois' Assembly Hall.

Playing in an era when freshmen were not eligible, Falk finished with 1,001 career points, which ranked fifth at the time in school history.

## Return to his roots

He enjoyed a brief stint in the NBA, playing for the Red Auerbach-coached Boston Celtics, before returning to Northwestern. He worked as an assistant for 10 years under three coaches before replacing Tex Winter as the Wildcats' head coach in 1978.

Falk directed Northwestern to its first postseason appearance in 1983. The Wildcats won 18 games that season and reached the second round of the National Invitation Tournament despite playing all its home games at DePaul's Alumni Hall as the Wildcats' home arena underwent a renovation.

"We won more games than any team in Northwestern history, yet we finished eighth in the Big Ten," Falk said. "The next year we

went 14-14 and finished seventh. That's how tough it can be. We felt we were very, very close at that point to being an upper-division team on a regular basis.

"Our recruiting was going well, but because of injuries, things did not materialize fast enough on the floor. Being around great people and at a great institution helped me sleep well at night."

## Administrative opportunity

Falk left coaching in 1986 and joined the Big Ten staff as an assistant commissioner in 1989, first working as an intermediary between the league's coaches and officials. His role eventually grew to include oversight of all the conference's basketball operations and work as the league administrator for men's golf.

"Rich does a good job of communicating with coaches," Illinois coach Bruce Weber said. "He's been in our position and knows where we're coming from. You may not always get the answer you want, but you'll get a fair hearing."

Falk is completing his 21st season of managing the league's officiating program, including the training, assignment and evaluation of all officials.

That job takes Falk to 50 games a year. He watches and breaks down tape of every other televised game that the league plays, either in the control room at the Big Ten office in Park Ridge, Ill., or through a video setup at his home.

"The evaluation process is extensive," Falk said. "We chart calls, no-calls for all three officials. We have a form that an observer at the site of the game fills out and the officials evaluate themselves and the other members of their crew. Every single play and possession in every arena is documented."

Those evaluations lead to assignments for the Big Ten Tournament and nominations for postseason NCAA opportunities for officials.

"It's a detailed process, and time has shown that the style of play in the Big Ten not only prepares teams for NCAA play, but it prepares officials to work at the highest level as well," Falk said.

Falk said he will miss the working relationship and friendships he has developed over the years in his travels throughout the Big Ten region, but he doubts he will be able to stray too far away from the game.

"Basketball runs through my veins," Falk said. "It's my passion and I've been fortunate. This business can be a little like a military lifestyle where you move around, but my wife and I have been able to spend 44 years in one area and have lived 42 years in the same town. It's been a good life."