

AN ENGINEER BECOMES A MINER BRANDL TRADES BASKETBALL FOR VOLLEYBALL; RETURN TO LEHIGH PROVES 'NOSTALGIC'

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Norm Brandl walked into Lehigh University's Grace Hall a couple of weeks ago, took a look at the 3-point line on the basketball court, picked up a ball and proceeded to knock down his first two shots from behind the line.

The bottom line: You can go home again.

But it wasn't the same.

The man who took those two shots was 31 years older than the hustling guard who scored more than 1,200 points during his basketball career at Lehigh. He was not back for a basketball game, but as head coach of the University of Texas-El Paso women's volleyball team. And the ball he used for the shots was a volleyball, not a basketball.

It was only the second time since graduating in 1962 that Brandl had returned to South Mountain. The first was for his 25-year class reunion, but the recent trip "was much more nostalgic," he admitted during a telephone conversation from his office at UTEP. "I walked up and down Fourth Street, hit the Tally-Ho and the Grotto, walked around the lower campus."

Brandl came to Lehigh as a hot-shooting 6-foot-1 guard out of Roselle, N.J., and the Engineers' basketball coach, the late Tony Packer, promised him a chance to play a lot of basketball. He grabbed it.

“I remember that we tried awful hard and didn’t get very far,” Brandl said.

In fact, Lehigh was just 17-44 in his three varsity seasons, but he managed to set a school record with 1,231 points in 61 games. That mark is currently eighth on the all-time career list, but his 20.18 points-per-game career average ranks No. 2.

He had feelers from the New York Knicks and a team that was known at the time as the Chicago Packers — later to be renamed the Bulls. He actually signed a professional contract with the old Allentown Jets of the Eastern Basketball League, but he was drafted into the U.S. Army before he ever had a chance to play as a pro.

It was in the Army at Fort Bliss in Texas that he added volleyball — and track and field, swimming and badminton — to his list of participant sports. “I became a total jock; it was better than doing K.P. or guard duty,” he quipped.

After two years in the Army, a year in New Jersey convinced him he wanted to be back in Texas; so, his family moved to El Paso in 1965. “I figured I would start here — and I’ve been here ever since.”

Brandl was a partner in a sports-shoes business when he approached the women’s basketball coach at UTEP in 1975.

“I wanted to sell her shoes; she wanted to talk about volleyball,” he said. “They had a team, a schedule — but no coach. She said she’d pay me \$300 a month and that I shouldn’t give up my day job.”

That was back in the pioneer days of Title IX, which brought women’s sports programs to the forefront on campuses across the country. The univeristy “was so desperate, they told me I could practice whenever I wanted to and that I should just tell them what I needed,” Brandl said. He couldn’t refuse.

He's now a full-timer at UTEP, and in his 18 seasons, Brandl has compiled a record of 293 wins and 250 losses.

At UTEP, volleyball is a sport in which Brandl needs to recruit strongly to compete in the Western Athletic Conference.

He admitted that his job in El Paso is a lot easier than it would be in Bethlehem. At UTEP, a full scholarship for an in-state athlete costs only about \$6,000 — and that includes tuition, room, board, books and fees. The cost for an out-of-stater is about \$10,000, still less than half the Lehigh tab.

The Miners have been playing women's volleyball in the WAC only three years and still have a difficult time against the likes of Brigham Young, which is ranked No. 4 in the country; Colorado State, another Top 20 team; San Diego State and Fresno State.

So, what was a team from West Texas doing at Lehigh in the first place?

Well, Lehigh Coach Jack Casteel "is from El Paso, and we go back a long way," Brandl said. "In fact, I got him involved in volleyball as a referee. When I heard he had surfaced in Bethlehem and at Lehigh, it gave me an idea."

Because UTEP travels a lot, players pile up lots of frequent-flyer miles. They used those coupons to make the trip to Bethlehem, where UTEP defeated Lehigh, Seton Hall and East Stroudsburg.

"It was a great trip; the people at Lehigh went out of their way to accommodate us. For our kids, it was great. Most of them have never been east of the Mississippi River. They saw a whole different part of the country and a different kind of educational facility."

Brandl has no plans of moving now, but he admits he's a long way from his original goals. He entered Lehigh with plans of becoming a chemical

engineer. "That major last about two weeks. I switched to business administration," he said.

"If someone had told me in my senior year in college that 30 years from then I would be in West Texas coaching a women's volleyball team, I'd have died of laughter," he said. But he doesn't laugh now.