

The Father of Elizabethtown College Athletics: Ira R. Herr

Ira R. Herr had a long-lasting effect on Elizabethtown College. Herr was a man of commitment, hard work, and purpose. On 13 February 1894, he was born to Jacob Reiser Herr and Amanda Risser Herr in West Donegal Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.¹ Herr had five siblings: Edgar, Anne, Frances, Mary, and Edith.² On Christmas Day in 1937, Herr married Kathryn Harper Nissley.³ They were married forty-eight years.⁴ Together they had one child: Lois Kathryn Herr.⁵ Lois eventually married Ellwood R. Kenkeslager of Chatham, New Jersey.⁶ Herr led a dense life with much success. He was employed at numerous institutions and held a variety of positions within the Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania community and many organizations. He is best known for his legacy at Elizabethtown College and the impact he had on his students, players, and peers.

Most people referred to Herr as “Coach,” and others dubbed him as the “Grand Old Man.”⁷ His career as a coach for various institutions defines much of his legacy. Coaching was only a small fraction of his life. His collegiate academic career began at Elizabethtown College and was completed in 1916 at nearby Franklin and Marshall College.⁸ Herr also received education from Temple University, University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia University.⁹ He began his professional career at Bangor High School and within a year he transferred to Penn Argyle High School where he taught social studies and coached basketball.¹⁰ In 1918, his career was briefly interrupted by World War I.¹¹ He served in a field artillery unit of the Army as a 1st lieutenant.¹² Until 1920, he taught physical education at Braddock High School after he returned from the war.¹³ Herr sought to explore a career in business and ultimately placed his teaching career on hold again.¹⁴ For a period of time he ran two shoe stores in Elizabethtown. In 1925, he revived his teaching career and took a position at Elizabethtown High School.¹⁵ There he coached the boys and girls basketball teams.¹⁶ In just a few years his legacy at Elizabethtown College would begin.

When Elizabethtown College was first started, intercollegiate athletics were not supported. The Brethren thought the sports promoted fraternities, class rushes, and hazing. The Board of Trustees claimed, “modern match games of baseball and football are not in accordance with Christian virtue and true education,” and denied the students’ request for permission to play against teams from town.¹⁷ School officials thought the school should be judged “not by what happens on the gridiron, but what its alumni do with their lives.”¹⁸ In

¹Jim Wile, “Ira R. Herr,” Geni, last modified Feb. 11, 2017, accessed Nov. 15, 2017, <https://www.geni.com/people/Ira-Herr/600000025386389856>; “Ira Herr, Retired E-town College Coach, Dies,” *New Era*, Oct. 22, 1986.

²Wile, “Ira R. Herr.”

³Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

⁴“Ira Herr, Retired E-town College Coach, Dies.”

⁵Wile, “Ira R. Herr.”

⁶Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ancestry.com, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; *Pennsylvania Veterans Burial Cards, 1929-1990*; Series Number: *Series 3*

¹²Ibid.; Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

¹³Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Jean-Paul Benowitz, *Images of America: Elizabethtown*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing), 88.

¹⁸Chet Williamson, *Uniting Work and Spirit: A Centennial History of Elizabethtown College* (Elizabethtown, PA: Elizabethtown College Press 2001), 111.

1926, the College Athletic Association was established with the goal of bringing intercollegiate sports to the college. Early in the 1927-1928 school year, they suggested to President Ober football be introduced to the school. Ober then brought the idea to the Board of Trustees, who quickly shot down the idea because of fear of crippling injury or death, students becoming distracted from school by football, and just the overall brutality of the sport.¹⁹ In the 1920s, students cheering on their classmates on the field became a popular image, one prospective students would want to be a part of. Elizabethtown's lack of athletics led Daniel Fray to write an article in *Our College Times*, the school newspaper at the time, pointing out how it was the only school in Pennsylvania without intercollegiate sports, which would make it almost impossible to compete with the other schools for incoming students.²⁰ Ultimately, the Board of Trustees recognized the importance of intercollegiate athletics to student recruitment. In February 1929, they granted official permission to play intercollegiate sports, although the basketball team started in the winter of 1928.²¹ On 19 November 1928, Ira R. Herr was appointed Head Coach of the men's basketball team by President Schlosser at age thirty-four. Schlosser thought he would be good for the job because of his youth and his local roots. The basketball team's first game was on 8 December 1928 against Millersville State Teachers College, who they beat by a score of twenty-seven to twenty-two. They beat Thompson Business College thirty-five to twenty-four on 13 December 1928 and Williamson Trade of Philadelphia thirty-one to twenty-four on 15 December 1928. Despite the successful start to the season, the team finished the year with just five wins and twelve losses. Herr began coaching multiple sports after the season ended.²²

Herr became Coach of Athletics in 1932, a position similar to Director of Athletics, and was head coach of the men's and women's basketball teams, baseball team, and tennis team.²³ Throughout the 1930s, Elizabethtown College athletic teams generally lost more than they won. They struggled to compete against other already established athletic programs, many of which gave players athletic scholarships, however Herr remained optimistic. Despite the optimism, the consistent losing caused *Our College Times* to publish several discouraging articles about the athletic program. Herr's skillful coaching and commitment to optimism and was rewarded with several highlights during the decade, the biggest of which was the baseball team's 1936 season where they had nine wins and only two losses.²⁴ During these years of losing, Herr's character was shown. He took more pride in taking an average player as a freshman and making him into a great player than starting with a freshman who was already a great player, and he cared more about his players playing a clean and fair game than winning.²⁵ In 1937, Herr started a new sport: soccer. It began as an intramural sport as a way to keep his basketball players in shape during the offseason, and the team would occasionally play against local high school teams. Intercollegiate soccer started in 1938.²⁶ Herr coached the team for the first five years and had a combined record of ten wins, twelve losses, and four ties.²⁷

The 1940s were a time of renaissance for Elizabethtown College athletics. In the 1945-1946 school year, the nickname Blue Jay was first used. A contest was held for a mascot, and the Blue Jay was selected by the students. In 1944, Guy Buch led the nation in scoring for the basketball team, and after he graduated, freshman Frank Keath filled the hole Buch left. Keath ended his career average 21.2 points per game, fourth all time in collegiate basketball at the time of his graduation. In addition to the basketball team's success, the tennis team had the school's first undefeated season in 1948-1949. The 1940s finished with Elizabethtown College sports teams being accepted as a full member into the Middle Atlantic Conference.²⁸

¹⁹ Ibid, 111.

²⁰ Ibid, 111-112.

²¹ Ibid, 112.

²² Richard K. MacMaster, *Elizabethtown: The First Three Centuries*, (Elizabethtown, PA: Elizabethtown Historical Society), 113.

²³ Ralph W. Schlosser, *History of Elizabethtown College 1899-1970* (Elizabethtown, PA: Elizabethtown College 1071), 149.

²⁴ Williamson, 139-140.

²⁵ Schlosser, 150.

²⁶ Williamson, 141.

²⁷ "Men's Soccer Year-By-Year Records," Elizabethtown College Athletics, 2017, accessed 13 November 2017, 1

http://www.etownbluejays.com/sports/2009/11/5/MSOC_Year-by-Year_Records.aspx?id=36.

²⁸ Williamson, 169.

In 1945 Herr was selected as acting Dean of Men for the college.²⁹ In 1950, when Director of Athletics became an official position, Herr was the obvious choice. Stanley E. “Whitney” Von Nieda replaced him as basketball coach but Herr remained coach of the baseball team.³⁰ In 1958, Herr returned to coaching men’s soccer. He coached the team for three seasons with a combined record of twenty-seven wins, four losses, and three ties. In 1959, the team won the Middle Atlantic Conference, and finished second in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics national tournament. In 1960, the soccer team was crowned co-national champions.³¹ In 1961, after more than thirty years, Herr finally retired from coaching at Elizabethtown College, and went on to teach social studies and coach baseball and basketball at the Patton Masonic School for Boys.³²

In addition to his service to the college, Herr was an integral member of the local community and participated in numerous civic groups. Only three years after its founding, Herr joined Masonic Lodge No. 682 and was a lifelong member.³³ Herr was also active in Rotary International, the Student Loan Foundation, American Legion, Traveler’s Protective Association, the Elizabethtown Club Board, Boy Scouts of America, and the Friendship Fire Company.³⁴ In local Elizabethtown politics, Herr served as a Republican Committeeman for two terms and proposed the incorporation of the Elizabethtown Public Library, as well as serving on the Library Board for ten years.³⁵ Herr didn’t just introduce the college to intercollegiate athletics; he also made strides to expand the sports offered to the youth of Elizabethtown. In 1925, he organized an inter-county tennis league that, by its second season, had participation from tennis clubs in Elizabethtown, Penbrook, Manheim, Lititz, Ephrata, Marietta, and Columbia.³⁶ He served as its president for fourteen years and eventually also started Elizabethtown Little League.³⁷ Among his multitude of awards over his lifetime, Herr was honored and distinguished for his service to the local community. In 1948, he was listed in “Leaders in Education.”³⁸ In 1959, Lancaster Sportswriters and Broadcasters honored him with the Headliner Award and the Smith-Herr Soccer Trophy is alternately awarded at both Franklin and Marshall College and Elizabethtown College to this day in Herr’s honor.³⁹ Among other honors, Herr was presented the Mr. Elizabethtown Award for Meritorious Service to the Community by the Loyal Order of the Moose, made a Paul Harris Fellow by Elizabethtown Rotary Club, and awarded the Certificate of Distinguished Service in the Cause of General Brotherhood of the Church of the Brethren.⁴⁰ On 7 May 1966, a large rock with a bronze tablet was placed next to the new baseball field that the Board of Trustees voted to name in Herr’s honor, and a ceremony was held in his honor.⁴¹ At the ceremony, President McCauley said, “Herr . . . personifies the intercollegiate athletic program on this campus,” he “initiated intercollegiate program . . . nurtured [the] program through its formative years,” and he was “literally a one-man force for athletics on this campus.”⁴² The baseball field is today just practice fields, but in 1970, the soccer field was dedicated in Herr’s honor.⁴³ In 1975 at Homecoming Weekend, the Elizabethtown College Athletic Hall of Fame was named in honor of Herr.⁴⁴ There is also a basketball tournament named in his honor.⁴⁵ On 21 October 1986 at Leader Nursing Center, Ira R. Herr, having lived a life of both athletic and

²⁹ Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 201.

³¹ “Men’s Soccer Year-By-Year Records,” 1.

³² MacMaster, 211.

³³ Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ MacMaster, 213.

³⁷ Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ “Former college coach dies.”

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 210.

⁴² *Ibid*, 208.

⁴³ “Ira R. Herr Field,” Elizabethtown College Athletics, 26 July 2013, accessed 13 November 2017, http://www.ETownBlueJays.com/sports/2013/7/26/Ira_R_Herr%20Field.aspx.

⁴⁴ Benowitz and Depuydt, 120.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

civic achievements, passed away at the age of 92.⁴⁶ Services were held at his church, St. Paul's United Methodist, Elizabethtown. A separate Masonic service was conducted by Abraham C. Treichler Lodge No. 682, as well as a military service conducted by the American Legion. Interment proceeded at Mt. Tunnel Cemetery.⁴⁷

Ira R. Herr was the face of Elizabethtown College for over three decades. The impact he left is still evident in the athletics program and the college atmosphere. He promoted the attitudes of unity, hard work, positivity, and commitment. It must be acknowledged that his presence was always felt when on campus.⁴⁸ Herr was regarded as quiet in temperament, yet influentially loud in his beliefs.⁴⁹ He is even credited as the responsible figure who ingrained high standards like sportsmanship, spirit, and strong morals into the Elizabethtown College culture.⁵⁰ He believed sporting events ought to be clean and reveal good sportsmanship.⁵¹ On 2 February 2000, the college awarded him the centennial medal for his commitment and servanthood.⁵² He was an honorable representation of the college, his community, and the various organizations of which he was associated. Herr is the undoubted father of Elizabethtown College Athletics and the many staples of the Elizabethtown community.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ira Herr File. Faculty Vertical Files. Hess Archives, Elizabethtown College. Elizabethtown, PA.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Schlosser, 151.

⁵² Williamson, 335.