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Donald J. Mohr interview, First Athletic Director and First Director of Financial Aid, Wright State University

Ken Davenport
Wright State University - Main Campus

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Wright State University
Retiree Association Oral History Project

Interview Date: April 4, 2001

Interviewer: Ken Davenport
Former Director of Admissions, Wright State University

Interviewee: Donald J. Mohr
First Athletic Director, First Director of Financial Aid
Wright State University

This is Ken Davenport, former Director of Admissions at Wright State University. The date is April 4, 2001. I'm interviewing Don Mohr as part of the Wright State Retirees' Association oral history project, the first Athletic Director and first Director of Financial Aid at the university. Hey Don, would you please tell me a little about your personal background and how you happened to come to Wright State?

Well, I graduated from North College Hill High School in Cincinnati in 1942 and I joined the Marines. I had offers for athletic grants at Ohio State and Miami and a few other schools, but the war was going on so I joined the Marine Corps. I got out in '45 and accepted a scholarship up at Miami University. But I found out after being away for that length of time in the service that I didn't particularly care for that, and I was in love with a girl in Cincinnati, so I transferred to the University of Cincinnati and got married, and became a teacher and a coach at Reading High School. I coached baseball, football and a little basketball, then I became a principal. I had a high school principal who became the Director of Branch Campuses for Miami University, and I'd always meet him and whenever I saw him he would say, "Hey Don, when you want to get out of this rat race you let me know, we got some jobs open." This was in the 60's, when things started to go a little haywire. Permissiveness was taking over and that wasn't my cup of tea, so in '66 I contacted him and the next day he said, "Come on up, I think I have a job for you." So I went up to Miami and, sure enough, the next day he sent me over to Wright State and I didn't have any idea where Wright State University was.

Very few people did in those days.

The only Wright University I ever heard of was up in Chicago at the time. So, I came over here and talked to White and Warren Abraham, and Wilbur Keister.

Was this Fred White who was the guy who invited you up?

Fred White. Yes. Well, no, Earl Theskin, of course, was the director of all the campuses. But I was interviewed by White and Abraham and Keister, and hired on the spot, and April of 1966 I started.

You started here in 1966. How long were you here?

I retired in '81.

So you have been away almost 20 years. It's hard to believe. Time flies. Tell us a little bit about your personal experiences at Wright State, what you remember about your experiences, personal experiences.

The unusual thing about it, our financial aid came from Miami University. So, as a result we were on the low end of the totem pole. I think that first year, starting in September, I think we had about \$23,000, something like that, and the majority of it was in loans or work study, things like that. We had no scholarship money whatsoever. That was one of the first things I had to do, was to start visiting schools and start talking to clubs, trying to get some money for grants in aids or scholarships. It was pretty good, nothing real big. \$500 here and \$500 there. I hit every women's club in the Dayton area; they were a softer touch than the men. Then, in the recipients, I always tried to get the ones I knew would make an impression because I always sent them over to one of the meetings to thank them for their support. As a result, we started building it up pretty good. Then, when we became our own independent, then we filed out own governmental things, so it started to build up.

When did you assume the Athletic Director's job?

Well, we used to all get together in the cafeteria in the morning for coffee, Golding and-

Golding was the first President at Wright State, right?

Yes, he was the first president, and some of the deans, and we would shoot the breeze and talk about athletics and that. One day Golding called me into his office and said, "Hey Don, I hear you seem to be the only one on campus who has been around athletics all your life." He said, "Why don't you draw up a proposal of what you think we should do?" Which I did, and I emphasized that if we do get involved in athletics, we shouldn't do anything until we do it the right way. So, it was taken to the deans and everything, and it was approved, and I guess in 1969 we started athletics.

The first sport we started was soccer. We had a field and everything, and the unusual thing about it, why we should start soccer in an area where very few high schools at the time were playing, but what was happening, things were winding down in Europe and all these people who were stationed in Europe were coming back to Wright Pat Air Force Base. As a result, they had all these kids who played soccer in Europe and they attended Wright State. So when Cliff McPeak came along, they played soccer intramural, so we could notice that there were some good soccer players. So that was the first sport we started, soccer. The unusual thing about it, we played a lot of these schools that had been playing soccer for years, these Div. III schools, and I think our record the first year was 13-5 or something. It was really amazing. They couldn't believe we would have such a good program just starting out.

Now did you coach that?

No, a fellow by the name of Bela Woellner, a Hungarian, who was just a cracker jack and he coached it for four or five years. He was the first coach and it was the first sport that we started.

Now, you talked about your proposal for the faculty. What sports did you indicate we should start out with?

Football. [Laughs]

Football, really? Obviously, that one never came to be realized did it.

No, there wasn't any way, that wasn't even on the board. That wasn't even considered. From visiting all the schools and everything, I found out that you get 10 miles from Wright State and nobody knew about it. You know, I used to go to Cincinnati, Hamilton, Middletown, and so forth. So I said the only sport we can start that is going to get us any news in the papers is basketball. Regardless of what you think about athletics, athletics will get the word out about Wright State quicker than anything. Any academic program you start will not compare to it. But I said, "We've got to do it right, we have to win pretty quickly." So we started it after the P. E. building was put in the plans so that we knew that within at least two years we would have a place to play. We started, like I said, soccer, and then we started basketball the next year. We played our home games at Stebbins and we practiced at various junior highs all around because you couldn't get in a high school gym. We practiced down at the fairgrounds a lot of the time.

John Ross had just retired as a basketball coach at Belmont. He was still teaching. So I hired him, I knew him from when I coached in Cincinnati. He agreed to come on a part-time basis, which we were really fortunate to get a man of his caliber for that. So he came up, and Jim Brown, who had played for him on the state championship team, we hired as an assistant, and they did a fabulous job. Of course we didn't have any money for grant in aids or anything, but we just took what was on campus, the first year. The second year, he talked to different people around and we had a few kids come in. That following year, we had aids, and the only thing we provided were the fees because we didn't have any residents. Then eventually we started the whole ball of wax.

Now, when baseball started, weren't you also the baseball coach?

To get John on full-time we started baseball the following year, so we made him basketball coach and baseball coach, and he visited schools for the admissions department. So he was a quarter basketball, a quarter baseball, and half admissions. Jim Brown was still part-time. He was on half-time; quarter basketball, quarter admissions. So, we all worked visiting. I was Director of Financial Aid yet. So it wasn't until we got the P. E. building completed that we started swimming, tennis, and golf and all the rest of the sports, that I had to make a decision which way to go. It wasn't a very hard decision. I just took the athletics.

When did you actually become Director of Athletics and drop the Financial Aid, approximately?

I would say around '71 or '72.

As I recall, a fellow named of Joel Cohen became the Director of Financial Aid for a period of time after that.

In fact, your friend Steve Scovac was working for me.

I remember that. Now how would you describe the character of Wright State in the early days, from you personal point of view?

Well, it was just a campus that the kids come and go. They would come here for some classes and go off to a job. We were really fortunate in the caliber of people they hired for the faculty and it was the same way in athletics. Like in golf, we hired a guy who was a golf professional, we just made him part-time. Chuck Leasher [ph]. Where could you go get- I mean it's like Ron Nischwitz. Eventually he quit professional baseball, and I had known him because when he played for Ohio State I was scouting for the Brooklyn Dodgers and we tried to sign him but he went with some other team. But I remembered him and knew about him so I talked to him as soon as I heard, and he took my place. John coached the first year of baseball, then I coached for three or four years and I was getting too much so I had to get out, and Nischwitz had just came on the scene so we hired him as the baseball coach.

Sounds like from what you said earlier about you and Brage [Golding] and others getting together, that you were kind of a close-knit group of people and just sat around and socialized a lot, and you talked about business as well.

Yes, we talked about the future and how it was going. When I came here, there was a half a building and that was Allyn Hall, the bottom floor of Allyn Hall. They had the Admissions office, Registrar, everything, the library- in fact my first desk was in a little hallway off of the library, and remember the Whissens, the English teachers? They were in the desk right next to me. No partitions or anything.

Tom is retired, Tom Whissen, but Annie Whissen is still here.

Is she? No kidding?

I believe she is still teaching. I don't think she took early retirement, so there are some good folks still at the university.

It was interesting, too. The first thing we had to do was get an athletic council, and each college had a representative, and I talked the President into having a representative that he could choose because I knew we had to make sure we had somebody on there to protect our interests, because sometimes you get these colleges and you get all these academic people, I

wasn't too sure where their interests would lay. And then we had two students on it, so we had a seven person athletic council. It was really interesting, some of the early battles and so forth. So I would recommend and they would approve, and I can remember Gordy Wise and Benner-

Gordy is still around, Carl [Benner] is around. I think they're both retired but they are still doing well.

“You just want us to rubber stamp everything you want.” [Laughs]

What were some of the most important issues facing the institution at that time?

From my point of view, in Financial Aid, is getting the money to attract students. Once we became our own University and got it to the federal program, then we were sure in better shape. Even then, though, most of it was student work. The loan program, we did have a little bit of money, that's for grants and that, but the students we were getting, they were used to working. I tried not to get anybody balled up in a loan that they had to pay off. With the way the federal program was, the loan situation wasn't that bad; you could take time to pay it off. Then, as I say, the longer we went the more free money we got for scholarships and that.

You talked earlier about your relationship with some of the faculty and the administrators. What kind of relationship did you as an administrator have with students during that period of time?

Since I had been around students all my life, I knew how to talk with them and so forth. I had good people in the office. Overall, I had good relations until the one time when I had to release a person, or I hired one person over another person who thought they should have had the job, and we had some things there. A certain segment of the student population didn't like it and they hung me in effigy and things like that. Then, once I became Athletic Director, I didn't have any problems, I didn't think.

Life was good.

Yes, because we developed good programs. Then after Cliff McPeak left I became director of Intramurals, too. I didn't have that much to do with it because Ken Knight was still here. Speaking of that, Cliff McPeak was more or less responsible for working with the architects to design the P. E. building. I was there to recommend and help along. But the thing about the P. E. building, you would not use state money to build an athletic facility. As a result, you build an educational facility, physical education, and you were allowed to put some bleachers and things like that in. So that was the way we had to start out.

In your mind, how was the athletic department grown in the time you were here?

It's just like the whole university. All the time I was here, the only sport that really had any grant in aids was the basketball, which was the right thing to do because that was the sport that was going to get the publicity to spread the word about Wright State. Of course you

weren't going to get the press unless you did some winning and that, which we were fortunate enough to do. So we tried to help some of the other sports, particularly swimming. We had two good people in swimming, Lee Dexter and Jim Dock, and they did a real good job. We had a good part-time diving coach, so we did give them a little help, but the rest of the sports, like even when I coached baseball, we didn't have any grant in aids or anything, we just took what was on campus, which I liked. Because when you get a kid coming out to baseball and he's not getting any help, you know he's out there just because he likes the sport, and we had some good kids.

During your time as Athletic Director, do you recall any of the students that you were going after who later might not have come to Wright State but might have gone on to some other institution?

There were some in basketball, which I can't remember, because John and Jim Brown did the recruiting and I took whatever they recommended. Because I used to set parameters about what we should do and the kind of student athletes we wanted, and as long as they met those guidelines we didn't have any problems. That was okay with me because they were the ones who were going to suffer the consequences. It was rough recruiting because like I said, when we started we didn't have any scholarships, so once we got the scholarships we had a good recruiting class. We brought in four the first year and from then on it was pretty good. It took time. We didn't have 10 grants all at once. We would get one or two every year. But that was the only way you could compete. It was my theory that for us to really have a good program, we had to play top flight competition. Now John and Jim, from the point of view of Jim coaching, they wanted to play some of the patsies that they could win. I wanted to balance the schedule.

We had one, and I don't think Jim and Ross [John] ever forgave me for it. I graduated from the University of Cincinnati and played with the basketball coach, who was Tay Baker at that time, and the athletic director and assistant athletic director were both good friends of mine. I knew we couldn't compete against UC but I thought we could stay with them enough that we wouldn't embarrass ourselves. So we needed to start making some money. So I signed a four year contract playing them at UC all the time, so we got some guarantees. But what happened, Tay Baker quit, the two athletic directors quit, and they started getting a bunch of renegades down at UC and [Gale] Catlett became coach, and he just used to cream our kids. I said, "Well, I'll go down with you every game and be there." Catlett got his comeuppance, though. His final year there he had a good team. No doubt, they would have some success in the tournament. He had a good, big center and he kept playing him the whole game while he was creaming us. They were beating us 20-30 points. The last quarter, the kid goes up for a rebound and comes down on somebody's leg and he shattered his leg. It took 'ole Gale and his team right out of the tournament. So we got even for it.

Since you coached at Wright State and was Athletic Director here in the late 60's, 70's, and early 80's, from your perspective, how has college athletics changed from the time you were in the fold, so to speak, to today?

Well, I think the main thing is there is just too much made over these kids as athletes. I keep calling them kids, supposed to call them men. I think we still have to emphasize the education part. But part of it is the fact that the professionals are sitting there and you can see the way it is now, these aces come up and they play a year or two and they go out and accept these big bonuses, which you can't blame them. But the thing is when you go play professional you better make it if you are depending on that instead of getting your education. I always felt that you should have student athletes, not just athletes. The thing that used to hurt- and I noticed this even when I was playing- you bring some of these students onto the campus from homes or areas that were real poor, you bring these kids in and you give them a grant in aid, which covers tuition, fees, books, room and board; nothing else these days. Now when I played, you used to get \$50 a month. Even those, they used to call it for dry cleaning and that. But now you bring these kids on the campus and you have all these other normal students [that] have a little spending money and that. These student athletes you bring in, a lot of them don't come from homes where they can get support. So this is really something that you have to watch out for. We brought one kid in from New York and he was here a month and his aunt died, who raised him. Well, he didn't know how to get home or anything else. So I called the NCAA, because you weren't supposed to give them transportation. I told them we were going to do it but I wanted to let them know, and it was okay. Things like that, I think you really have to be careful about.

So many of them, because of this pro stuff, they think, boy, that's what I'm going to do. They make up their mind in the 7th and 8th grade, "I'm going to be a pro ball player." A lot of that is the parents' fault, they're living their life through their kids. They couldn't do it so their kids are going to do it. I think we build them up too much.

Do you have a perspective on big money in athletics today? Television contracts, tournaments, that kind of thing? Good or bad?

Bad. The thing that really, and it's just a sign of the times, when I was growing up as a kid, we didn't have adults organize things for us. We organized ourselves. Every day after school we would run and get our gloves and bats and go get a pick-up game and play ball. These kids don't do that anymore. You have all these great fields around and you don't see anybody on them unless it's a regularly scheduled practice or game, with parents or the older people, the adults, running it. You don't have any way of building leadership, it comes naturally. That's one thing I think hurts, too. But as far as the big money, they say look at what all these athletes are getting, look at what all these movie stars and singers and things...it's just a sign of the times. You build them up and there are so many that don't make it. I scouted baseball and you would go sign a person that you thought had a good chance. But for every 20 you sign, if you got one who would make the majors you were lucky. That's the way it is in any sport. We build up their hopes too much. I always had the philosophy and what I always told the athletes, I have two grandchildren right now who are hell on wheels. One of them is going to Furman, got a free ride. I always tell young people [to] shoot for the moon, but if you don't make it don't feel defeated; you just go another route. But a lot of times with these athletes, they quit school and think, well, I'm going to make it. But they don't make it and they think they are a failure in life.

Do you have any perspectives on major challenges facing higher education today, from your point of view?

Well, since being away from it, I guess it's just like it has been all the time. I hear the lay of the students coming in from some of the high schools and so forth. I don't know. I don't know where to start. No doubt, the breakdown in education is starting with the home and the way it is. I know, I have five children and I have grandchildren now that are married and they have children, both the parents are working, and boy, that really worries me. Things are so different today, I can't even comprehend it. The thing I think, you have to set realistic goals and do everything to attain them. Sometimes we try and build these things up too much. It's just like saying, well, come to college, get your college education and you'll be a success. That isn't absolutely true, either.

You have been gone now almost 20 years. You maintain some sort of a link with Wright State, right? Tell us, how do you do that?

Up until the last couple years, I always came back to see some basketball played, because I knew all the coaches and everything, and some of the kids. I pay attention to every sport. That is one thing I'm disappointed in. I don't know if your sports information department has changed here but you hardly see any reports of Wright State scores in the national papers. Like USA Today, I always buy that and that's the first thing I look for. You hardly ever see Wright State. Now, I don't know if the department, the sports information department, doesn't get them on the wire, or what it is. I don't know, but I notice that the teams in the same conference, you see those, so I don't know where the breakdown is.

I am interested in it from the education point of view, too. I just can't get over when I come back and see these building and how this place keeps changing. Like when I came the first year, I think the university was a year and a half old, and we had 3,000 students, all commuters, and now when you hear 17,000, and like you said, 3,000 on campus residents besides the ones off-campus. It's just amazing. Then, when you see the doctoral programs and the med school and nursing school, it was just unbelievable the growth, so quick.

Are you proud to have been a part of that history?

Oh, very definitely, very definitely. I think it's amazing. And like I say, it goes back I think to the kind of people we got right from the beginning: White and Golding and then Kegerreis, who I served under both of those. And that we got a good Board of Trustees, I guess, that was really interested in doing things the right way. Then the people in Dayton who have been so supportive; when I came up all you ever heard was University of Dayton.