

Teton alumni show fruits of highest team GPA

If athletic scholarships were stock investments, putting money on any one of the mighty Williston State Tetons of 1992-94 would have been extremely smart, especially if the goal was to make a positive difference in the world.

While male basketball players often have a “dumb jock” reputation, this team turned those expectations upside down, earning the very highest GPA among 460 U.S. community colleges for two straight years, and they’re still making their mark today.

We interviewed “Fast Fred” Fridley, Dr. Tracy Hjelmstad, Dr. Brett Vibeto and Dave Leom about those pivotal years that raised the bar of excellence for future students at Williston State.

Leom, now a math teacher in Milaca, MN, was recruited from Watford City High where, at 6'8", he was known as “Tree” and, along with Fridley, helped Watford City win the state championship his senior year.

Leom, who had a 3.94 GPA in high school, heard embarrassing reports about some underachieving athletes at Williston State, he said, but former recruiter and WSC Coach Terry Olson insisted on a change.



Dave Leom, Math Teacher, Milaca, MN

“My dad was a parts manager at a John Deere dealership,” said Leom, “He didn’t have enough money saved to send us to college, so Williston State scholarships helped a lot.”

Now Director of the WSC Foundation, Terry explains: “We were looking for a better caliber player, a better caliber person and a better caliber student, and Dave was all of that.”

Yet Leom recalls that the cost of college was a major hurdle. “Dad didn’t

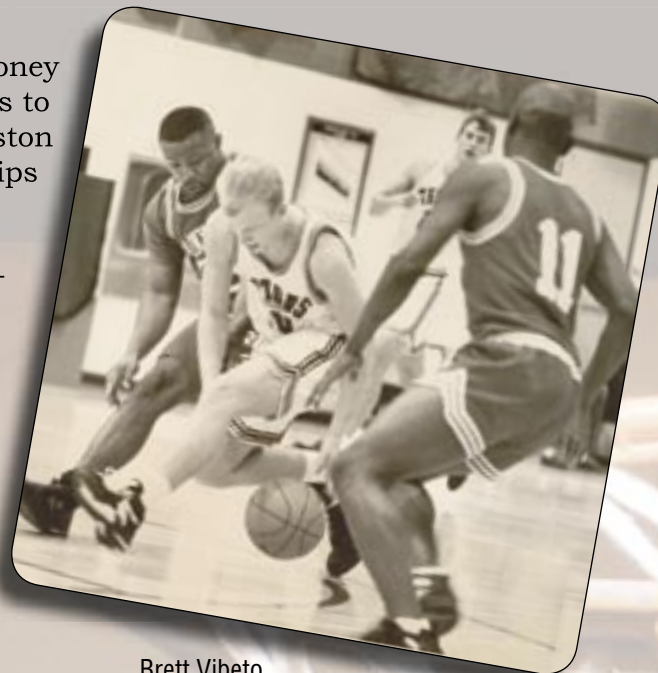
have enough money saved to send us to college, so Williston State scholarships helped a lot.”

Leom and teammate Sean Stephens, now a Ph. D. psychologist in his home country of Trinidad, helped create a new culture at the basketball player’s dorm, POPS House, now a private residence at 603 E. 18th St E. in Williston.

“When I got there, there were loud parties late at night so you couldn’t sleep or prepare for classes,” said Leom. But he wasn’t about to let his academic record slip.

“Sean and I sat down with the guys and said, ‘This shouldn’t be going on. If you want to party, do it elsewhere.’”

“We had a mindset and expectation,” explained Dr. Tracy Hjelmstad, now a podiatric surgeon at Trinity Hospital in Minot. “The recruiting message was clear: ‘We’re not just looking for talent. We’re looking for mature, good people, who work hard both on and off the court,’ and that became the standard at Williston.”



Brett Vibeto



Dr. Tracy Hjelmstad, Podiatric Surgeon, Minot, ND

Eight guys received straight As. “From outside looking in, you may think, ‘What a bunch of nerds.’ But I take pride in that. We would beat teams we had no business playing, come home, do our homework, then go watch a movie.”

So much so that eight guys received straight As, earning the honor for highest GPA in the National Junior College Athletic Association.

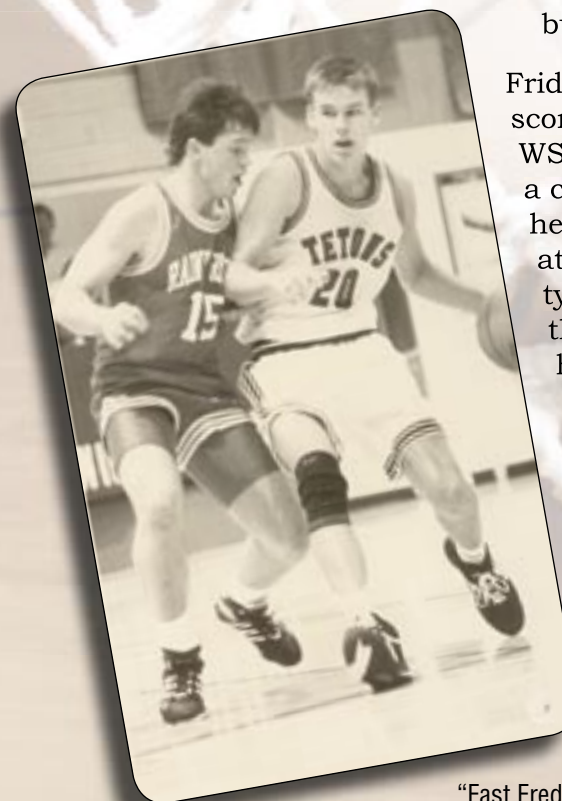


Dr. Brett Vibeto, General Surgeon, Williston, ND

“Oh, we had our fun at POPS House. The all-night video games, and feeding our high-cholesterol fish with hot dogs. But there was an unwritten rule that Williston State athletes first take care of business.”

“From outside looking in, you may think, ‘What a bunch of nerds,’” said Hjelmstad, fresh out of an ankle ligament surgery. “But I take pride in that. We’d beat teams we had no business playing, come home, do our homework, then go watch a movie.”

“Oh, we had our fun at POPS House,” said Dr. Brett Vibeto, now a general surgeon at Mercy Medical Center in Williston. “But there was an unwritten rule that Williston State athletes first take care of business.”



“Fast Fred” Fridley

Fridley, all-time scoring leader at WSC and now a coach and health teacher at the University of Mary, said that’s a rule he follows as head coach of the women’s basketball team.

“I ask for equal effort on the floor and in the classroom,” said Fridley. “In six years I’ve had seven Academic All-Americans and out of 19 sports at our school, our team has had the highest academic rating for five years in a row.”

The guys are thankful for the donors and professors who helped make those glory years possible.

In turn, Fridley says, he knows he and others will return the favor, keeping the Teton tradition going. “As they say, you never forget where you started. I know the Teton alumni will give back once we’re established.”

“My strongest memory,” said Coach Olson, “was huddling with the guys, tears in my eyes, after losing the regional championship of 1994, and not being able to finish my speech,” unusual even to this day, he said.

“It wasn’t that we lost, but that I wanted one more time to call them the champions that they were.”

(For more alumni stories and a full list of where the champion Tetons are today, visit www.wscfoundation.com.)



Fred Fridley, Coach and Teacher, University of Mary, Bismarck, ND

“What others invest in you pays off tenfold, especially at a small college like Williston State. Your money, and the one-on-one attention of professors, is going to affect everyone in the school community in some way.”

Aafedts perpetuate giving to WSC athletes

As Williston State’s first women’s physical education instructor, Colleen “Coke” Aafedt embodied the spirit of service, starting cheerleading and the Pep Club at Williston State, and founding the Winter Carnival. We thank Ardean and Colleen for their continued generosity this year, as they established an endowment for athletic scholarships with a substantial gift.