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## A cherished court, a lifetime of memories

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There's a farm just north of Waterloo with a basketball court fit for a movie.

It has a dirt floor, an ancient basket and a history of producing Division I basketball players.

Tom Heitz, 42, is one of them. The Munster resident is one of six family members to play D-I, a list that includes nephew Brad Miller, who played at Purdue and now for the Sacramento Kings.

After a standout career at Hamilton, the 6-foot-9 Heitz was named an Indiana All-Star. He headed to Kentucky in 1979, where he lasted five seasons before getting drafted by the Pacers in the eighth round.

Recently, Heitz was named to the 2004 Indiana Hall of Fame Silver Anniversary Team -- a group that includes former Wirt star Ray Malaine and Lew Wallace standout Frank Smith Jr.

Look at Heitz's life, though, and you'll see how basketball helped pave the path. You'll see a tall, lanky kid spending hours on a dirt court in the middle of nowhere. You'll see him inside legendary Rupp Arena. You'll also see him making the choice to retire, rather than going to Europe, after getting cut by the Pacers.

Heitz came to Chicago to trade commodities after his playing career. He got married to wife Carmen, had two sons -- Tommy, 10, and Robert, 8 -- and hasn't looked back once. Not in a bad way, that is.

Heitz still thinks of that dirt court now and then. His life is tied to it forever.

"We didn't have AAU ball," says Heitz, whose sons now shoot jumpers there during visits. "We just had that court, and we played against each other."

Beat on each other is more like it. Heitz's brothers were older and two of them were bigger.

Mike, who played at West Virginia, is 7-foot. Jim, who played at Oklahoma and died in a boating accident at 35, was 6-foot-11. Phil, who never played in college, is "only" 6-foot-4. And, oh yeah, he could 360 slam dunk.

Then there's Miller, another 7-footer whose roots can be traced to that farm court.

"That's where Brad honed his NBA skills," Heitz says. "We had Brad in tears a lot, but he can thank us for his roughness."

As for Heitz, who now consults with college athletes, he's true to his Hoosier roots -- even while bleeding Wildcat blue.

"I got the best of both worlds," he says. "I got to play in the greatest high school basketball state, and then for the best college program in the country. I couldn't ask for anything more."

There is one more thing he'd probably like: another crack at Georgetown. The Hoyas, led by Patrick Ewing, beat Kentucky

53-40 in the 1984 Final Four before winning the national title.

"Not one of our starters made a field goal in the second half," Heitz laments. "Our front line that year was three first-round draft picks -- Sam Bowie, Melvin Terpin and Kenny Walker."

Bet you a group like that would relish a second chance. Maybe Ewing and Co. would be up for it, bad knees and all.

Finding an open court wouldn't be difficult. There's one just off County Road 16, a little north of Waterloo and Hamilton.

It's got a dirt floor, an old hoop and thousands of memories. There's just one rule.

No blood, no foul.

**This column solely represents the writer's opinion. Reach him at [bhedger@nwitimes.com](mailto:bhedger@nwitimes.com)**