



Ellis coaches with record-breaking style

“Get it in your hands and fire.” Coach **Dean Ellis ’83 BS** does not yell, but his voice is easily heard above dribbling basketballs and squeaky shoes. He circles groups of players as they practice, carefully observing their speed and technique. “Get your rhythm down. Get your rhythm down,” he advises, and moves with the players to illustrate what he wants. They heed his advice without question.

These tactics reflect Ellis’ 25 years of coaching experience and are the reason why he is the all-time leader for men’s basketball wins at NMU. In January 2005, Ellis captured his 301st win, which surpassed the former NMU record of 300 held by Glenn Brown.

Ellis was born and raised on basketball. His father coached the sport, and Ellis grew up watching

NBA games and playing the sport throughout high school and during college. Although coaching seems to be a natural extension of his personality, Ellis did not always want a career in basketball. His first two years as an undergraduate student at Southwest Missouri State University were dedicated to architecture. It wasn’t until his junior year in college that Ellis decided his passion for coaching basketball was stronger than it was for any other career.

Ellis’ break came in 1980 while he was still a student at Southwest Missouri State. He wrote a 13-page scouting report describing the offense, strengths, and weaknesses of Eastern Illinois University, which NMU later used to defeat the team.

“Glenn Brown, who was the coach here at that time, called me up and asked if I wanted a coaching

job as a student assistant,” Ellis recalled. “That’s how I came to be here, and I haven’t left since.” Transferring to NMU was a homecoming for the Negaunee native, whose parents still live there.

Brown proved to be a major influence for the young coach. “Glenn taught me how to deal with people in a positive manner. I’ll never forget him.” Ellis became the head basketball coach when Brown passed away in 1986.

Other coaches may have inspired Ellis over the years, but he has developed a style that is all his own.

“My style includes keeping my team competitive and intense; it’s more of a teaching approach than a demanding one. I try to keep a solid defense and an alert offense.” While Ellis has an overall positive approach to coaching, he admits that he isn’t

always able to maintain a positive perspective. “I tend to be overemotional about things. I’ve also tried to do things my way and take risks.”

One of the risks Ellis has taken during his career is recruiting players from other countries. “It’s always risky business bringing foreign players in because the culture and language are so different for them. But I believe it brings more diversity to our school, and we’ll be better for it in the long run.”

Ellis also has learned to change with the times, which is something he said some coaches struggle with.

“When I first started, the coach said ‘run’ and everyone ran. Now they just stand there and ask why. This job has taught me to be patient with players and staff members.”

The relationship between coaches and players is crucial to how the season will turn out, and Ellis works to establish relationships with his players that extend beyond their NMU years. Equally important, though, are the relationships the players form with each other. During practice, shouts of “nice shot” and “good try” are heard throughout the gymnasium. However, Ellis said it takes more than good sportsmanship to be a successful athlete.

“You need to have God-given talent. That’s imperative at the college level. But you also need to have a drive to be successful—not just in sports but in everyday life. Focus, discipline, and organization also play key roles. Good athletes will take chances in games during ‘crunch time,’ which is something that cannot be taught.”

Like many of the athletes he coaches, Ellis has his own superstitious rituals he performs before each game.

“Before I leave the house on game days, my room has to be in order. My wife doesn’t make the bed on those days because she knows I will. Considering how awesome NMU basketball has been in my career here, I’d say it’s working.”

When asked about his most memorable win, Ellis cited the 1993 NMU vs. Southern Indiana University game. NMU was one of the top five teams in the country at that time.



While basketball demands 70-80 percent of Ellis’ attention, he is also the head golf coach at NMU. He said he has found the two sports difficult to juggle, as golf season happens right before basketball season in the fall and again right after basketball season in the spring, but the recent hiring of an assistant golf coach has lightened the load significantly.

“We beat Southern Indiana with a last second shot by **Brandon Sager ’96 BS** during the first round of the NCAA tournament. We lost in the next round, but that game was amazing.”

Losses, he said, are more difficult to handle. The best way for Ellis to recover after a loss is to talk with his players the next day. He said his most crushing loss happened in 2004 against Michigan Tech.

“We played a great game but got beaten right at the buzzer. We were in a position to win, so it was a

difficult loss. There’s nothing even close to that loss.”

Although Ellis loves his career, he is looking forward to retirement. “I don’t want to travel—I’ve done enough of that on buses. I will probably go south for the winter and take it easy with my family. I will be especially involved in whatever my sons are doing.”

In terms of the lasting impression he wants to leave on NMU,

Ellis said, “I want to teach my players how to be successful because that’s something you need in and out of the game. It doesn’t matter how many more wins I accumulate, if my players retain my coaching and apply it to the rest of their lives, that’s when I’ll know I’ve done my job right.”

“Get your rhythm down, guys!” Ellis booms, and although his players are tired after an hour of drills and scrimmages, they’re secretly thankful that he did not decide to become an architect.

—Becky Kratz