

Tallest of Lobos Will Be Missed

Feb. 20, 2009

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He was taller than life.

Paul Kruse came to Albuquerque from his family's Wyoming ranch in 1970, much-ballyhooed as the University of New Mexico's tallest basketball recruit of all time at a towering 7 feet, 3 inches.

Yet, during his decade-long stay in the Duke City, it was neither his height nor his basketball skills that left such a strong and lasting impression on so many.

"A finer friend," says Tibo Chavez, "there has never been."

"Everybody during their life," says Steve Bowman, "should have a friend like Paul. ... He really defined friendship, and I'm lucky to have known him and have had him as my friend."

Kruse, a man of acute intelligence, multiple talents and unflagging good will who just happened to be 7-3, died on Monday in Torrington, Wyo., just northeast of his longtime home in Cheyenne. Kruse, 57, had been suffering from heart problems.

Lobo fans from the 1970s will remember Kruse more as a curiosity and a fan favorite than a major contributor to the team. Recruited to UNM under coach Bob King, who favored a slow to moderate tempo and was renowned for his work with big men, he wound up playing for Norm Ellenberger. Kruse and Stormin' Norman's fast-break offense went together like white bread and a Reuben sandwich.

Years later, Kruse said he considered transferring but decided against it and never looked back. And he did manage to save 'Berger's bacon more than once, preserving victories by altering shot after shot.

Nor did Kruse ever look back at basketball. After graduation, he spent four years as a special-education teacher at Albuquerque's Eisenhower Middle School. He then attended UNM law school, where he met his longtime friends Chavez and Bowman.

Chavez, with whom Kruse shared a house, says he sometimes wondered how his gregarious roomie managed to pass his law classes.

"He'd be on the phone in the evenings," Chavez says, "and I'd be saying, 'Paul, maybe we should fix a quick dinner or run out and get a bite and then hit the books.'

"He'd say, 'I'm gonna be on the horn for a while,' and it would be an hour, two hours, three hours pretty much every night. I couldn't believe how many friends he had."

“The Kruser” did pass those law classes, with distinction, and he would make many more friends – some in the highest of places.

In 1981, Kruse left Albuquerque for Washington, D.C., to serve on the staff of Wyoming Sen. Malcolm Wallop. Later, Kruse would work in the first Bush administration in several capacities.

“Secretary (Manuel) Lujan had hired Paul as one of the top solicitors in the Department of the Interior,” Chavez said. “Paul would go into the Oval Office for photo ops, taking all kinds of people, like (the president) was one of his buddies. It was like. ‘Hey, let’s go meet the prez.’”
For certain, Kruse was a hard guy not to like.

In 2000, Kruse was invited to the inauguration of President George W. Bush. Among Kruse’s prize keepsakes of that experience was a photo taken of himself with actress Bo Derek.

Kruse’s Christmas card that year was that photo, with the inscription, “Bo Derek and Paul Kruse wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.”

His card this past Christmas was a photo of himself with boxing promoter Don King. The realization this week that it was the last Christmas card he would get from Kruse, Chavez says, was a devastating one.

“He was a lifelong Republican and I am a lifelong Democrat,” Chavez says. “(But) in the darkest and most difficult times of my life ... I just called Paul and he was there for me.”

In 1992, Kruse left Washington and spent three years traveling the U.S. and the world. He then returned to Wyoming, working in the public and private sector as a land-use consultant.

Though Kruse’s experience as a Lobo wasn’t altogether a happy one, he would make the drive from Cheyenne to Laramie each time UNM played Wyoming. Each time, he would don “cherry and silver in a sea of brown and gold.”

As his good friend Bowman explained to me for a 2001 feature story on Kruse: “It doesn’t matter who you are or what you do; you don’t lose Paul as a friend.”

Sadly, on Monday, many people lost one.

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