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“DOMINANCE”: THE STORY OF THE HARDING UNIVERSITY BOWLING TEAM

By Collin Barnett

What if there was a college athletics team whose history was relatively unknown, yet had the same elements of some of the most famous teams in history? Though bowling might not be as popular as other sports, the Harding University bowling team has a story filled with peaks, valleys, and everything in between. This is the story of a team, that through teamwork, individual dominance, and great coaching reached levels of success that had never-before been seen in the sport of bowling.

The first season of bowling for Harding University occurred in the same year that the Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference (AIC) first sponsored bowling, 1963. Harding competed against six other AIC schools in a “mail-o-graphic” format, meaning that each school would bowl on their own during the week and send their scores in to the conference at the end of the week, where the top five scores (out of ten) were taken.¹ Although not known at the time of formation, the ‘Bison Keglers,’ another term for bowlers,² would reach heights never-before seen by any other AIC school in any sport. After finishing third in the AIC in 1963,³ the Keglers, comprised of the top intramural bowlers from the fall, finished second in the AIC/District 17 tournament. This gave them a shot to go to the NAIA national tournament in Kansas City, Missouri, marking the first time that any

¹ “Harding Bowlers Compete by Mail,” *The Harding Bison*, February 21, 1963.

² “Kegler,” Merriam-Webster, accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kegler>.

³ “Harding Bowlers Place Third In State College Competition,” *The Harding Bison*, April 11, 1963.

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Harding team competed in a national tournament.⁴ At the national championships, the Bison Keglers finished 26th overall with freshman Larry Yurcho taking third place individually by averaging 197 pins, only four behind first place.

Hoping to follow up the success from 1963, the 1964 team was only able to place third in the AIC, missing the NAIA Tournament;⁵ however, the following year was when the success really began. The 1965 Keglers won the AIC for the first time in an absolutely dominating fashion,⁶ setting records for total pins over a season and for the highest team score for a single week in AIC history.⁷ The team also placed five men in the top ten individually, including a second-place finish by Larry Yurcho.⁸ Although they would miss the NAIA tournament, this team set the standard for Harding in the AIC championships.

Following the lead of the 1965 team, the 1966 Keglers once again dominated the AIC, finishing first for the second straight season and smashing records set the year before for total pins (22,808) and for team average (190 per person) while freshman Johnny Beck set the AIC record for individuals with a 197 average.⁹ However, the thing that separated the 1966 team from previous years was national success. The '66 Keglers finished 6th in the NAIA tournament with

⁴ "Bowlers Take Second In AIC, Appear Headed for National," *The Harding Bison*, April 25, 1963.

⁵ *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1965), 209.

⁶ Larry Yurcho, "Bowlers Clinch AIC Championship," *The Harding Bison*, April 22, 1965.

⁷ Larry Yurcho, "Bowlers Set To Defend Crown," *The Harding Bison*, February 23, 1966.

⁸ *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1966), 99.

⁹ Larry Yurcho, "AIC Champs Face NAIA Test," *The Harding Bison*, April 20, 1966.

Yurcho and Beck placing second nationally in doubles.¹⁰ This was quite an achievement but would only be a warm up for the teams that followed. The 1967 bowling team won a third straight AIC title while reaching new heights on the national level.¹¹ Along with placing 4th in the NAIA tournament, the highest finish ever by any sports team from Harding, freshman Charles Burt won the individual national championship, while also placing second in doubles with fellow freshman Charles Webb.¹² On his way to first and second place, Burt also broke the record for average individual score in the tournament by averaging 202 pins per game.¹³

Building on the success of the 1967 team, the '68 Keglers won their fourth straight AIC title, while freshman Gary Parsons won the AIC for highest individual pin total.¹⁴ After this dominant conference performance, the Bison Keglers finished second overall in the NAIA tournament, while placing two individuals in the top ten.¹⁵ At the time, this was by far the best finish in program history and set the stage for another great season in 1969. At the start of the '69 season, there was so much hype surrounding the program that Coach Ed Burt said that "We're going all the way; first the AIC tournament and then on to the nationals!"¹⁶ Coach Burt had a good reason to be confident: the '69 Keglers returned all but one member from the team that had finished

¹⁰ Dennis Organ, "Bison Bowlers Rank 6th in Nation," *The Harding Bison*, May 11, 1966.

¹¹ Ronnie Reeve, "Bisons Outbowl AIC, NAIA District," *The Harding Bison*, April 19, 1967.

¹² *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1968), 215.

¹³ Ronnie Reeve, "Burt No. 1 in NAIA; Team Places 4th," *The Harding Bison*, May 11, 1967.

¹⁴ David Crouch, "Bowlers Win Fourth Straight AIC Trophy," *The Harding Bison*, April 12, 1968.

¹⁵ "Bison Bowlers Second," *The Harding Bison*, May 3, 1968.

¹⁶ David Crouch, "Optimistic Coach Predicts Victory . . .," *The Harding Bison*, February 21, 1969.

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second in the NAIA just a year ago, including the sensational Parsons and Burt.¹⁷ After winning an unprecedented fifth consecutive AIC title and going to the NAIA tournament for the fourth consecutive time, it appeared to be destiny that the Bison Keglers would win their first national championship.¹⁸ However, despite all of the momentum that they had built, the Bison Keglers would finish a respectable fourth place in the NAIA as a team, with Charles Burt placing fifth individually and second in doubles with Charles Webb.¹⁹ Although the '69 season may appear to be a letdown, it only set the stage for what was about to happen on the national stage.

After three straight top five finishes in the NAIA tournament, the 1970 team seemed ready for a run at the ultimate prize, a NAIA national championship. After a hot start to the season, the Keglers won their sixth straight AIC crown, including a first-place singles finish by Gary Parsons, making him the first bowler to ever win two AIC singles titles.²⁰ Following their dominant conference performance, the Keglers made the trip to Kansas City for the fifth straight year where they won their first national championship, also marking the first time that the AIC had ever had a member win a national championship (in any sport).²¹ Coach Ed Burt attributed the first-place finish to “team work” and called seniors Charles Burt and Charles Webb “the key to our success this year.”²² They obviously played a pivotal role in the

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ David Crouch, “Bison Keglers Win AIC Championship,” *The Harding Bison*, April 25, 1969.

¹⁹ “Burt, Webb Lead Keglers In National Tournament,” *The Harding Bison*, May 9, 1969.

²⁰ “Bison Keglers Win AIC Championship,” *The Harding Bison*, April 17, 1970.

²¹ “Keglers Topple Foes To Win National Title,” *The Harding Bison*, May 8, 1970.

²² “Harding Bisons win NAIA National Bowling Title,” *Searcy Daily CITIZEN*, May 4, 1970.

success of the team, as they, along with Gary Parsons and Mark Poteat, placed in the top five individually, including a first-place finish for Charles Burt. This was Burt's second individual national championship, making him the first to ever win multiple times.²³ Burt also rolled a 227 in "the climactic game" which was the highest game of the tournament.²⁴ Following his historic career at Harding University, Charles Burt was honored by being inducted into the NAIA Hall of Fame in 1977.

After the first national championship in school history, Coach Burt's 1971 team faced a lot of pressure, and they lived up to it in every way. The 1971 Keglers once again won the AIC, their seventh straight conference title, while placing Mark Poteat and Gary Parsons first and second in AIC individual scoring.²⁵ On the national stage, the Bison Keglers won their second straight national championship. While defending their crown, the Bisons placed three bowlers in the top ten individually, including a third-place finish for sophomore Dave Hudson.²⁶ Hudson also won the doubles championships with Glen Hammer, as well as rolling the high game of the tournament with a score of 265.²⁷

Expectations were high for the 1972 team and they lived up to them; the "Tenpin men" won their eighth consecutive AIC title while placing six bowlers among the top eight in conference play.²⁸

²³ "Harding Bisons win NAIA National Bowling Title," *Searcy Daily CITIZEN*, May 4, 1970.

²⁴ "Harding Wins NAIA Meet Bowling Title," *Arkansas Gazette*, May 3, 1970.

²⁵ "Keglers Capture AIC's Top Spot," *The Harding Bison*, April 16, 1971.

²⁶ "Bisons repeat for NAIA bowling title," *Searcy Daily CITIZEN*, April 27, 1971.

²⁷ "Harding Wins NAIA Bowling Title Again," *Arkansas Gazette*, April 25, 1971.

²⁸ *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1973), 209.

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Following another strong showing in conference, the Bison Keglers prepared for a run at their third straight national championship in Kansas City, where they would win the trophy. On their way to a third straight NAIA title, the Bisons won 13 of 15 games, including “an all-time record high game of 1,097 against Pacific University.”²⁹ This marked the second time ever that a NAIA bowling team had won three straight national championships (La Crosse State) and added to Harding’s legacy as the only school in the AIC to “ever win a national team championship.”³⁰ Harding also placed four in the top eight, including a first-place finish for junior Dave Hudson. On his way to his first individual national title, Hudson also set new NAIA tournament records for average pins (210.12) and total pin fall (3,162), both of which were held by former Bison bowler Charles Burt.³¹ After this historic success from 1970 to 1972, the 1973 Bison Keglers would try to become the first bowling team to ever win four national championships, let alone four in a row.

With expectations high to continue the national dominance of the past three seasons, the 1973 Keglers were under pressure from the beginning. After a fast start to the season that saw the Keglers leading the AIC, team member Zearl Watson was disqualified due to lack of enrollment hours. At the time of his disqualification, Watson was first in the AIC individually and the team had seven bowlers in the top fourteen of the AIC. However, after Watson’s disqualification, the Keglers went from having a 300-pin lead to trailing by 1900 pins.³²

²⁹ “Harding wins third bowling championship,” *Searcy Daily CITIZEN*, May 8, 1972.

³⁰ “Harding wins third bowling championship,” *Searcy Daily CITIZEN*, May 8, 1972.

³¹ “Harding Captures Third NAIA Title; Hudson Sets Mark,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 7, 1972.

³² King Buchanan, “No. 1 bowling ranking lost by ineligibility,” *The Harding Bison*, April 13, 1973.

Even after this setback, the Bison bowlers were still able to finish third in the AIC, halting their streak at 8 straight AIC championships while placing six bowlers in the top fifteen of the AIC individual standings.³³

Despite not coming away with the AIC title for the first time in nearly a decade, the Keglers were still able to qualify for the NAIA tournament by winning the District 17 tournament. With the hope of a fourth straight championship on the line, the Keglers made the trip to Kansas City, where they were only able to place second as a team, meaning that the coveted fourth national team title was still eluding them.³⁴ The 1974 Keglers faced the challenge of getting back to the winning ways of past teams and they responded strongly, winning their ninth AIC title in ten years and making their ninth straight appearance in the NAIA tournament.³⁵ Individually, the Keglers also dominated, placing five men in the top six of the AIC, including a first-place finish for Zearl Watson; however, in 1974 an AIC title was not followed by an NAIA title.³⁶ The 1974 Bison Keglers finished third in the nation, a wonderful season by most teams' standards but not quite up to par with the Bison Keglers' standards.

After back to back top three finishes, the 1975 Bison Keglers looked to return to the national championship glory that had been the norm during the early '70s. The 1975 season culminated the team's tenth AIC crown in eleven years, with junior Brad Davis rolling a total of 4,920 pins, the highest total ever for an AIC season.³⁷ Following their AIC success, the Bison Keglers returned to Kansas City in search of the mythical fourth national championship. Once in Kansas City,

³³ King Buchanan, "Keglers seek to put victory puzzle together," *The Harding Bison*, April 27, 1973.

³⁴ *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1974), 260.

³⁵ "Keglers start new dynasty," *The Harding Bison*, April 12, 1974.

³⁶ *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1975), 271.

³⁷ "Davis leads team to championship," *The Harding Bison*, April 4,

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the Bisons dominated, winning the team national championship as well as winning the singles and doubles championships. In the singles, Gary Beck placed first overall and Zearl Watson placed second; Beck and Watson were also the doubles team that won the championship. Beck was also voted the A.O. Duer award as the most outstanding bowler. Although the Harding bowling program had seen its share of dominance, this level of historic run led Coach Burt to say “This is really great. It’s something I’ve dreamed about but never thought would happen.”³⁸ This quote epitomizes how great the 1975 Harding University Bowling team was, reaching levels of success that had never been seen before.

Following the unprecedented success of the 1975 team, the 1976 Bison Keglers finished conference play strong by winning their eleventh AIC crown in twelve years, with Zearl Watson winning the AIC individual crown. However, they did not see the same level of success nationally, as they fell to eighth place before storming back for a fourth-place team finish. The 1977 team was filled with potential and lived up to it during conference play, winning their twelfth AIC title as a team and placing four bowlers in the top five of the AIC, including Kevin Fisher, who won the AIC singles with a 190-average pin fall.³⁹ This strong conference showing resulted in confidence heading into the NAIA tournament, which can be seen by Coach Burt saying “We have a stronger team this year because we have had more face-to-face competition with more schools and this has really paid off.”⁴⁰ While the confidence may have been warranted, it did not result in the same level of success that the Keglers had seen in years past. Although they placed five men in the

³⁸ “Keglers sweep crowns,” *Searcy Daily CITIZEN*, April 21, 1975.

³⁹ Buzz Ball, “Wheeler leads keglers to AIC crown,” *The Harding Bison*, April 1, 1977.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

top sixteen nationally, as a team, the '77 Keglers were only able to finish third.⁴¹ The fact that the phrase “only able to finish third” is a way to describe the Bison Keglers season is a testament to the level of success that the program had under Coach Burt, which the 1977-78 Petit Jean Yearbook compared to the type of success seen for UCLA basketball under Coach John Wooden, and it is easy to see why. Between the inception of bowling in the AIC in 1963 and 1977, the Bison Keglers won 12 of 15 conference championships, including streaks of eight and four consecutive conference championships, letting them participate in the NAIA tournament for 13 straight seasons. Out of these thirteen appearances, Harding finished in the top four eleven times, including four national championships. Up to that point, Harding had never finished lower than fourth under Coach Burt. With success like this, it is clear why the Bison Keglers were being compared to Bruin basketball.⁴² Coach Burt attributed the success of his team to three things: “Winning attitudes, hard work, and winning tradition.”⁴³ The 1978 Keglers hoped to continue this winning tradition, and did, partially, by winning the program’s thirteenth AIC title. After this, the Bisons made their record fourteenth appearance in the NAIA tournament, but they were only able to capture fifth place this time around.⁴⁴ This marked the first time that a team coached by Burt had finished outside of the top four and would turn out to be the last team that Burt would ever lead to the NAIA tournament.

Following the 1978 bowling season, the NAIA discontinued bowling due to a lack of schools participating; however, due to a commitment to the schools, the AIC still sponsored bowling for two

⁴¹ Buzz Ball, “Harding keglers capture third in NAIA finals,” *The Harding Bison*, April 22, 1977.

⁴² *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1978), 184.

⁴³ Buzz Ball, “On the Ball,” *The Harding Bison*, March 3, 1978.

⁴⁴ “Seniors help keglers capture fifth place in NAIA bowling meet,” *The Harding Bison*, April 21, 1978.

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seasons, giving the Bison Keglers a chance to find a different conference that did not compete under the NAIA. During the 1979 season, the Bison Keglers once again won the AIC, their sixth straight and fourteenth in total; they also began to participate in tournaments that were put on by the Southern Intercollegiate Bowling Conference (SIBC) and the American College Union International (ACUI). Both leagues contained teams from the NAIA and the NCAA, and in an SIBC match Harding defeated the third ranked NCAA school Penn State.⁴⁵ Heading into the 1980 season, the Bison Keglers showed a tremendous amount of promise. As a team, they captured the final AIC championship, their fifteenth in eighteen years, while having the eight highest scorers in the conference, including junior Mike Bedwell, who broke the AIC record for pin fall average (207 pins).⁴⁶ Bedwell also set an SIBC record with a 194-pin fall average. Bedwell's younger brother, Jonathan Bedwell, was also a force, setting a school record with a 757-scoring series while helping Harding set the AIC scoring record for a round (2343 pins). The younger Bedwell, who was only 19, tragically passed away from injuries sustained during a car accident.⁴⁷

The 1980 season would prove to be the last for Harding bowling. After winning all but three of the possible AIC championships over the years and being the only AIC team to ever win a national championship in any sport, outside circumstances forced the Bison Keglers to fold.⁴⁸ It was deemed unfeasible to drive to Louisiana every weekend to compete in the SIBC, so following Harding's policy of not sponsoring any sport that was not also sponsored by the AIC,

⁴⁵ *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1980), 126.

⁴⁶ Linda Hilbun, "Harding takes another title," *The Harding University Bison*, March 28, 1980.

⁴⁷ *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1981), 298.

⁴⁸ "Keglers capture fifteenth AIC title," *The Harding University Bison*, April 4, 1980.

the bowling team and all of its success were finished.⁴⁹ Although there were rumors surrounding the folding of the team, the decision came down to it just not being affordable, as explained when Dr. Ganus said, “If the AIC hadn’t dropped it, we would still have a team. That is it in a nutshell.”⁵⁰ As far as reactions from the team, there were reportedly no hard feelings and the team only had one bowler eligible for competition due to compensation rules.⁵¹ Coach Ed Burt summed it up perfectly by saying, “It’s kind of sad in a way. All of a sudden there’s nothing left. But I could see this coming.”⁵²

Despite the ups and downs towards the end, the Bison Keglers reached a level of success rarely seen in sports. Although there may no longer be a bowling team at Harding, their achievements on the lanes through teamwork, individual dominance, and great coaching, can never be taken away, and they leave a legacy of success most teams only dream of.

⁴⁹ “Bowling team folds, reasons well justified,” *The Harding University Bison*, February 20, 1981.

⁵⁰ Bradley and White, “Bowling team disbandment is explained,” *The Harding University Bison*, March 27, 1981.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Petit Jean* (Searcy, AR: Harding University Yearbook, 1981), 298.