

Legendary Knight captivates another Penn State audience

By Jeff Rice

- jrice@centredaily.com

UNIVERSITY PARK — Penn State basketball fans can still see it. Greg Bartram driving toward the bucket, Chris Reynolds grabbing his jersey, Sam Lickliter's hand going up — signaling a foul on Bartram.

Arguably the most infamous officiating call in Nittany Lion hardwood history went the visitors' way in late in regulation of No. 1 Indiana's double-overtime 88-84 defeat of Bruce Parkhill's team on Feb. 9, 1993 in Rec Hall.

Nearly 16 years later, the memory didn't come quite as clearly to the man who coached the Hoosiers that night.

"There was a really difficult call at the end of the game," Bob Knight said Monday night in a building a few blocks from Rec Hall. "I honestly don't know whether a foul was called or not. I don't think there was."

The winningest coach in college basketball history (902 triumphs), who spoke at Eisenhower Auditorium Monday as part of Penn State's Distinguished Speaker Series, teasingly greeted a large and captive audience by thanking it for "a better reception than we got when our teams played here."

Knight's Indiana teams went 15-1 against the Nittany Lions. There are many Penn State fans who still believe it should be 14-2.

"Somebody mentioned that to me tonight," Knight said during a brief session with reporters before the speech. "And I said, 'If you're a Penn State fan, you think that there should have been a foul called. If you're an Indiana fan, you'd said there shouldn't have been a foul called. It was a situation that happened so quickly that the official, it was just impossible for him to get in position to make any call."

“The thing was, I really liked Parkhill and had a great respect for him. If we’d have gone on from there with one loss, it didn’t make any difference. But it would have been a great win for the Penn State team, beating the No. 1 ranked team in the country. I had real empathy for them because of that.”

Current Penn State coach Ed DeChellis, who was an assistant on that 1993 team, his staff and several of his players were in Eisenhower on Monday. Earlier, Knight addressed the challenges Penn State coaches have faced in trying to raise the program to the next level. He believes a lack of top players in and around State College has been the biggest hurdle.

“You just don’t go somewhere and recruit kids. There has to be a reason for a kid to come to your school,” Knight said. “And the most important reason is proximity.”

Knight, who turned 68 on Saturday, retired from his job at Texas Tech in February, turning the program over to his son Pat in midseason. He moonlighted as a television analyst for the remainder of the year and has since passed the time fishing in Mexico, Idaho, Colorado and Wyoming.

Could he return to coaching? Knight said he hasn’t thought about it much but would consider returning under the right circumstances.

“Something that I thought would be really good,” he said. “Something that I thought, ‘This is the place where I’d like to go, this is the place I think would be a very good situation.’”

“I think you’re always interested in a place you can win, a place you can recruit. I think the things that are important for having a good team will always be important.”

During about a 50-minute speech, Knight reminded the audience that “winning is not a sometime thing.” Blending his typical spicy language and dry punch lines into stories about former players, such as Mike Krzyzewski and Michael Jordan, Knight urged students to be flexible and ready for change, and that winning — or success in life — was less about making big plays than eliminating mistakes. The coach who was fired at Indiana for what the university called “a pattern of unacceptable behavior” said that the majority of obstacles people face are created by themselves.

“You’re here not to get an education,” Knight said. “You’re here to get on the highway to success.”

Knight has enjoyed watching Penn State football coach Joe Paterno guide his team to a 9-0 start and into the national championship picture. He said the two still chat by telephone but didn’t say how often, and that he believes Paterno, whose contract expires after this season, will coach beyond that if he wants to.

“You don’t coach with your hip, you coach with your mind,” Knight said. “He probably has as good a mind for that game as anybody that’s ever coached.”