

On the upswing

Haller has brought success to Baylor basketball program

by Frank L. Christlieb
Battalion Staff
WACO—Struggling through a dismal 1977 season, the Baylor Bears couldn't find the right winning combination.

While Coach Eddie Sutton and the Arkansas Razorbacks were running, gunning and shooting their way past the rest of the Southwest Conference with a 16-0 league record, Coach Carroll Dawson's Bears were standing dead in their high-top sneakers, unable to muster the talent to keep up with the rest of the conference.

And the result? Baylor wound up the season with an 11-17 overall record and a seventh-place 5-11 conference record.

But before the final shot had been taken and the final buzzer had ended their season, the Bears lost Dawson and gained a young coach entering his first job at a major university.

Only weeks before the end of the season, Jim Haller jumped from his post at McLennan Junior College to take a shot at coaching a team that during the past three seasons had finished with records of 12-13, 10-16 and 12-15. And although no one at Baylor expected any quick miracles, Haller's entrance made believers out of the folks who were already holding funeral services for the Bears.

After leading McLennan to a 28-6 record in his only season at the school, Haller instantly reversed Baylor's misfortunes and turned his program into a winning outfit—one that has a 9-5 record so far this season.

Haller, then 31, coached the Bears to a 72-70 victory over the fourth-place Texas Longhorns in the 1977 SWC tourney. Baylor then lost to third-place Texas Tech in the second round, but the future promised only improvement for Haller's young squad.

During the past five seasons, the Bears haven't been the strongest force in the SWC, but they've managed to finish as high as second place in the league.

Led by all-conference performer Terry Teagle, Baylor tied the Houston Cougars for second place with a 10-6 SWC record in 1981. After receiving a bye in the first round of the league tournament, the Bears lost to TCU by nine points but finished at 15-8.

Haller's 1981-82 squad, which lost to the Aggies by scores of 47-46 and 64-63 and defeated them 58-55, recorded the most victories (17) by a Baylor team since 1971. Coach Bill Menefee led the Bears to an 18-8 record that year.

The Bears haven't had a hand in an SWC title since 1950, when they tied Arkansas with an 8-4 record. Looking even further back into the Baylor record books, the Bears came oh-so-close to a national championship during 1948, when they lost in the national title game 58-42 to Kentucky.

For now, Haller's still trying to find the key to a conference title, which for the past few seasons has been an Arkansas-Texas-Texas A&M monopoly. But the Baylor coach, now 36 and in his sixth season with the Bears, finds the team's yearly improvement a promising sign.

"I am proud of the way that our basketball program has improved during the past few years," Haller said. "We've had a great deal of support from the university, the faculty and our fans, and Saturday night's crowd (at the Aggies' 68-66 victory over the Bears in Waco) was a perfect example of that."

"We've had some great players here through the years, such as Terry Teagle and Vinnie Johnson, who were both first-round (NBA) draft choices. Even though we haven't won a conference championship, the fact that we've been successful has really given our program a lift."

When Teagle, the Bears' all-conference player during the past three seasons, left Baylor to play for the Houston Rockets, most Baylor followers predicted the Bears would experience a rough year. But after winning its first six games of the season, Baylor has found that new leaders have stepped in to fill Teagle's sneakers.

"I think the loss of Terry motivated our players, because they knew that they could play without him and play well," Haller said. "I think there's been an absence of that one great star. Teagle was our leading scorer and rebounder for three years, but this year's team is a little dif-

ferent. There's no star at any one position."

For instance, Baylor seniors Jay Shakir, Darryl Baucham, Craig Kaiser and Ozell Hall have led the team in scoring, along with sophomore guard James Stern. But Stern and Shakir, ordinarily strong outside shooters, combined to hit only two of 18 shots against the Aggies in Saturday night's loss.

Although Haller finds himself in the midst of veteran coaches like Sutton, Shelby Metcalf, Guy Lewis and Gerald Myers, he says he doesn't consider it a disadvantage.

"Not at all," he said. "We've beaten every school in the conference and done several things that other teams haven't done. I

just try not to let things like that bother me. All I try to do is to go out and do the best job I can, whether it be in recruiting, coaching or speaking engagements."

During his first year of coaching, Haller had a good teacher in the Aggies' Metcalf. After graduating from Sam Houston State University in 1967, Haller spent one year as an assistant under Metcalf at Texas A&M.

Haller, whose squad has a 1-2 SWC record entering tonight's game with SMU in Dallas, said he considers the Cougars and the Razorbacks to be the league favorites. However, he considers at least six teams to have the talent to finish high in the standings.

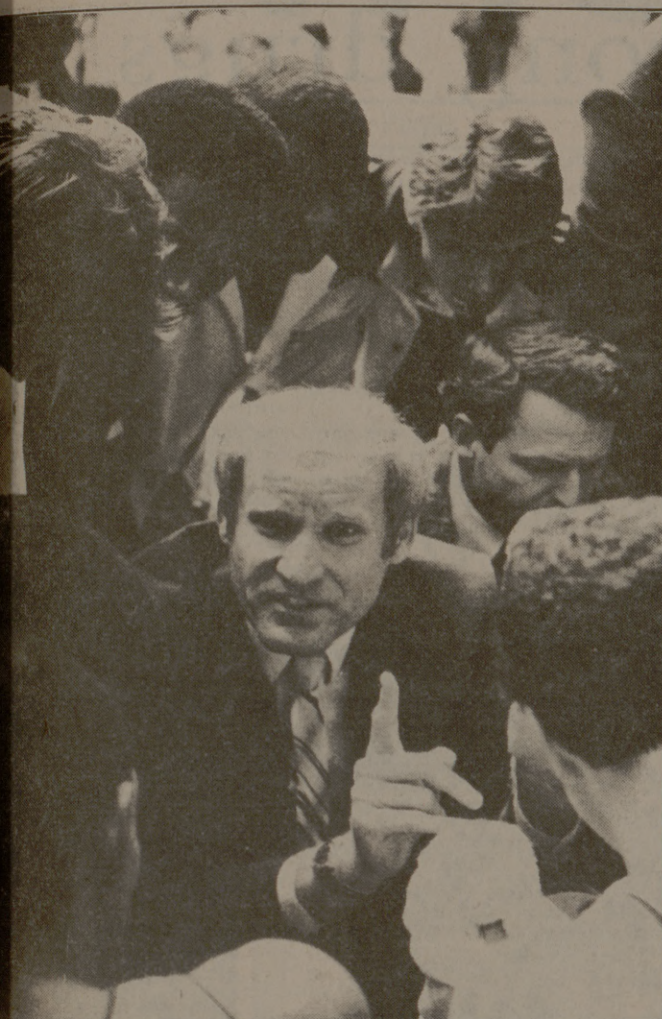


photo by Donn Friedman

Baylor coach Jim Haller makes a point during the Bears' loss to the Aggies Saturday night in Waco. Under Haller, the Bears have compiled 82 victories in the past five-plus seasons, and have a 9-5 slate so far in 1982-83. The Aggies defeated Baylor 68-66.

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