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Orsten Artis

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Orsten Artis
INTERVIEWER: Charles Martin
PROJECT: Texas Western's NCAA Championship basketball team
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 28, 1986
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Member of Texas Western's 1966 NCAA Championship basketball team.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Experiences playing basketball for TWC, the 1966 basketball season, opinions of coaching staff, black-white controversy.

Length of Interview: 30 minutes Length of Transcript 12 pages

Orsten Artis
February 28, 1986
By Dr. Charles Martin
1966 NCAA Championship Basketball Team

M: I start off with just a couple of routine questions and then we begin to go on, such as where were you born, where did you grow up, this sort of thing. Where did you grow up?

A: Okay. I grew up in Gary, Indiana. I was originally born in Arkansas but I was less than a year old when my family moved to Indiana. I went to high school in Gary, Indiana. I graduated in 1962 from _____ High School in Gary.

M: Did you play a lot of ball in high school?

A: Yes, I lettered in three sports, football, baseball and basketball, my freshman and sophomore year. My junior year and senior year I only lettered in baseball and basketball. I was scoring champion of my conference in '66. I broke all records. I had a 28 point average.

M: How did you hear of Texas Western in Gary, Indiana?

A: Well, at that particular time I had never heard of it until Don Haskins-- who is now still a coach here at which is now University of Texas at El Paso--he came and visited me and he seen me play a couple of games and he liked what he seen. I myself came down to this school to visit before my graduation from high school and I met some of the older guys and I guess they kind of talked me into coming down here. It was a growing school at the time. I liked the city itself, the surroundings. I liked that and the weather. I liked the weather all year round.

M: Was there any kind of a culture shock in coming from Gary which is fairly industrial and crowded to the wide open spaces of El Paso?

A: Oh, yes, it was. I'm used to, you know, elbow to elbow with people but

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when I come down here it was a altogether different atmosphere. And I guess that kind of helped me in deciding to come down here to Texas Western.

M: Um hm. What did you think of Don Haskins once you first got down to El Paso?

A: (Chuckles) Well, I didn't have to really deal with him my first freshman year. Moe Iba was my coach so I had to deal with him. But the three years that I played under Don Haskins I enjoyed playing under him. I think he was a good coach. You know, he was helpful and our lifestyle today with different things he had told us about that would occur when we, you know, get older, we could see it when we got older. But he was an inspiration I guess in not only myself but the rest of the guys [also]. Very inspiring.

M: How would you rate the degree of difficulty, the work rate, for your practices compared to what you'd been used to?

A: Well, the only difference I think [was that] in high school it was kind of a shorter practice because we had to find facilities to practice in. We had to share one central auditorium for ten high schools that was in the city. But here at college the practices was longer. They got you in better shape than high school. There was different things that I hadn't known about when I was in high school as far as getting in shape, like running up and down the stairs. I never did that in my life and I always thought I was in shape. When I come down here to Texas Western I found out that I wasn't in shape. But it was fun. He had his (chuckles) bad times, Coach Haskins, I guess. He was good to us at times and sometimes, well, we deserved whatever he gave out.

M: (Chuckles) Well, let's see, for the '65-'66 team you would have been

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then a junior or a senior that year?

A: No, I was a senior.

M: Was a senior. So it was your final year?

A: There were three of us seniors. We had three seniors on our team: myself, Flournoy, and Armstrong were the three seniors.

M: At the start of the year did you think that this team might be successful? What kind of hopes did you have looking over your teammates?

A: Well, I thought we had good personnel on paper but I didn't really feel that we would go this far...that far, that is, because of the fact that the previous year, my junior year, we eventually went to the NIT. But the team as a whole, we didn't jell the whole year and I think we lost about ten games that year. So it carried over to the '65-'66 year, which had been my senior year, and I don't think either one of us thought we would go as far as we did.

M: When in the course of the season did you begin to get your confidence that you might do more than just okay, that you might really be aiming for something outstanding?

A: Well, I think the turning point was--I can't recall that we played New Mexico first or Arizona State first but whoever we played first, I think there was a turning point. I think it was Arizona State because we went to Tempe and Don Haskins' team has never won in Tempe and we beat them. We beat them real bad. I think about 20 points or so, and that was one turning point. In the University of New Mexico game at Albuquerque where we was down at halftime I think about 19 or 20 points and we come back and we beat them, and I think that told us something there that we could, you know, be a team to reckon with. And I think we won about 22 games in a row, I'm not sure. I think it was 22.

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M: Um hm. Well, you won everything down until the final game as I recall.

A: Right. The final game of the season, regular season game, we lost to Seattle. And I think the last second shot it was, and they beat us by two points. But I think the momentum we had before that loss carried over into the start of the playoffs and we really showed that, you know, we could take the whole thing. And we played Oklahoma City the first game of the tournament and we beat them pretty handily. I think the next game was Cincinnati.

M: Cincinnati, yeah.

A: And that was a hard stop. We beat them in a single overtime, and then the following night we beat Kansas in a double overtime, and from there on in, after Kansas, the other two games, the championship game and the semi-state game were relatively easy.

M: Yeah. I wanted to ask you about something. What happened out in Seattle after the loss at Seattle? That's a famous incident apparently among players.

A: Well, (Chuckles) we had lost a game and, you know, we had won 22 in a row so we shouldn't have got uptight about the game. We didn't, but the coach did. He had never had a curfew the whole year and after that game, after the game we lost, he had a curfew and there were several players who missed the curfew and there was remarks made by the coach that...I don't know if I should tape it. (Chuckles)

M: Polite fashion.

A: Well, coach didn't like it and he kind of put of scare into us that he wasn't going to help us anymore. But we turned the tables on him. After we won the championship he was his old self again.

M: (Chuckles) How would you characterize your style of play during the

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year, both on offense and defense?

A: Well, I think we kind of...my style...I was always a team player ever since I came down here and Coach Haskins instilled in me, you know, the responsibilities of playing defense. See, you can win games playing defense, good defense, more so than you can offense, because if you have a cold night offensively and if you're playing good defense, you might still win the game.

M: Yeah.

A: But I characterize myself as a team ballplayer. I play, you know, the style that was good for the team, and I think as a whole each individual played the same type.

M: Is this the kind of style you played in high school in Gary or is this somewhat different?

A: It was quite a bit different because in high school it was always run and shoot and very seldom did we play any defense, good defense. Well I guess they averaged about 28 points a game so it was a far cry from...I think the most I averaged here at UTEP was 12 points. I averaged about 12 points for three years in a row, I believe.

M: What about on defense. Did you run more man-to-man or zone?

A: Well, Coach Haskins always did like man-to-man defense. He never did like zone defense. Always telling us to move our feet. (Chuckles) Look at his stomach, to not look at the ball, at his feet, just the stomach. And move your feet.

M: (Chuckles) Do you remember anything about what later might be humorous incidents at practices or dorm life or travel with the guys that year?

A: Well, I remember an incident involving Bobby Joe Hill where we had, we went out there, we went over to Juarez on that particular night and we

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had practice the next morning. And I don't know how Coach Haskins found out that we was there drinking, but the, during the practice (Chuckles) he made us run. He made us run I don't know for how long. But Bobby Joe Hill, I thought he was going to kill Bobby Joe Hill as much as he made him run. Seemed like he made Bobby Joe run more than the rest of us. I don't know for what reason but Bobby Joe's, his mouth started turning purple.

M: (Laughs)

A: That's how much he made him run and we all felt sorry for him and, "When is Coach going to make him stop? Bobby Joe going to drop dead."

M: (Chuckles)

A: So I guess that was more or less the most comical thing that I can remember doing that year. And he was always getting on Nevil Shed about one thing or another.

M: Nevil was also along with Baudoin, one of the clowns?

A: Right. Louis Baudoin, he is by far...he's funnier than Richard Pryor. (Laughs). You might call him a white Richard Pryor. He kept us going. You know, there was never a dull moment even before the game started. Like the championship game with Kentucky. Now we was all...coach wanting us to relax and don't say anything, you know. But that wasn't...I don't think that was helpful in, you know, calming us down. And what Louis Baudoin did, he was the one who kept us going, laughing, kind of taking our mind off the game for that instant, and like I say, we went out there and played a hell of a game. We beat Kentucky and I can, you know, I can say that Louis Baudoin was--although he didn't play in a game--he was a big help. Just, you know, getting our mind off the game at that time. But he was a funny guy. (Chuckles) He is so funny.

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M: What did you think about going off to play in the Final Four? Well, it wasn't always called the Final Four, but [when] you were getting ready to go off to College Park, realistically what did you think your chances were? Were you nervous or excited?

A: No, I don't think we was nervous at all because of the fact that during the whole season we had experienced all type of wins. There was some we blew out of the gym. There were some games that were so close you couldn't even get a piece of paper in between. And like I said before, that Utah game and the Kentucky game, the final games, were in my opinion the easiest games we had, except for Oklahoma, Oklahoma City, the first game of the tournament. But Kentucky and Utah [were] the easiest games we played during the whole tournament.

M: Um hm. What was the reaction of the team when you won it? What was the reaction of the Kentucky and their players when they didn't win it?

A: Well, we were elated to have won and got in the Final Four. I think that's all Coach Haskins wanted. I think he wanted us to win, but that was good enough for him that we got that far to the Final Four. But we really didn't go down there not to play the type of ball we had been playing the whole year. We used to say that we wasn't going to change anything, you know. And we had played them heart-stopping games and if it went down to that, as long as we win, you know. If that was the type we were going to play, that was the type we was going to play. But like I said, Kentucky, they were upset because wewere the underdogs. And Kentucky had thought they had a pushover. They hadn't played a team that played as close a defense as we did on them, and I don't think we played anybody any closer than we did in that championship game as far as defense is concerned. We seemed to, you know, go back and get that

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extra, you know...to go forward and being underdogs, we just had that little extra... But I don't think we were nervous at all because, like I say, before the game we was all clowning and laughing and, you know...just another game. And I think that's helped us a lot, too. The funny thing about that was that I think Kentucky had a loss on the same day that we lost our final game that season. I think we both won about 22, 23 games in a row that year. We had the longest winning streak with Kentucky and so when we lost on the same day--they lost earlier in the day but we played Seattle that night.

M: What was it like coming to El Paso after winning the NCAA?

A: Man, it was... The enthusiasm was so great you can cut it with a knife and before we landed we could see the huge crowd of people there at the airport waiting for us and you know it's a feeling that you'd never experience but that one time...the emotion and enthusiasm. I mean it brought tears in our eyes but, you know, it was tears of joy, to see that many people there and seeing that they cared and they followed us all year through, you know, thick and thin, wins and losses. So it was just heartwarming to see that many people there. I can't recall how many it was but thousands and thousands, and during the parade from the airport to the college they was lining the streets and, you know, you might not go through that again. This college I'm talking about. I hope they do but, you know, it's something that they might not do [again].

M: Yeah. What did you do when you finished out that year of eligibility, then?

A: Well, I went back home in Gary and worked a while and I come back here in September. I came back for half a semester and got married and went back to Gary where I taught school for three years. And after the three years

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I got on the Police Department, Gary, Indiana, Police Department and now I am a detective on the Gary, Indiana, Police Department.

M: So you've been with the police department since about 1969 or 1970?

A: 1973.

M: Okay. How did your view of Coach Haskins change, if any, looking back on it after finishing as opposed to when you were a player?

A: (Chuckles) Well, I've only seen him a couple of times since we won that championship. He has mellowed with age. I guess all of us have mellowed with age, you know, because what he tried to instill in us then we couldn't see. We, we was there just for fun, you know. Thought practicing was [for] people who couldn't play. But like I say, Coach Haskins has mellowed and me talking to him those two times I have seen him, he's calmed down. He's not as hyper as he was, to me. I haven't seen him coach any game. I'll be able to see that tomorrow night, if he's changed any. But my problem--well it's really not a problem--He didn't get on my case during the game or in practices and I know I made just as many mistakes as the other players, but I couldn't understand why he didn't get on my case like he did Bobby Joe and Nevil Shed.

M: Nevil always seemed to be in trouble?

A: He was. All the time. All the time.

M: Well, one of the things that sports writers made about the Kentucky game was the fact that, as it turned out, Texas Western started five black players and Kentucky started five white players. In the course of the year were you particularly aware of this and particularly then aware of it around the championship game?

A: Well, we knew our first five was black. It started out that way the beginning of the year, you know, so it just grew on us but after a while

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we were just five basketball players. Whether we was black or white, we just jelled together and it didn't really bother us, you know, that we was five black guys playing five white guys. We were all there for a purpose--to win, and it just so happened five black guys won. But I remember Coach Haskins before the game quoting Adolph Rupp, who was Kentucky's coach at that time, that he had never played five black guys before and he made the quote that "Five black guys would never beat his teams." And we kind of thought that Coach Haskins was just trying to hype us up, you know. And we really didn't need that, and we wasn't sure if he had said that or [it was] just Coach Haskins talking. But it never crossed my mind that there was five blacks that night. I guess a lot of people think that we might have started something because you see so much of that today, black guys. Mostly your major colleges have five black guys. But like I say, I remember that Utah game where it was a black guy who was almost beatin' us single-handedly. Until, I think it was Coach Iba's idea to put Armstrong in, and Armstrong, who is white, did a hell of a job and it don't be for him playing that good defense, we might not have got to that championship game. So, we all, you know, we helped each other. It wasn't any prejudice or nothing on the team. We all got along fine. And it was great back then.

M: Um hm. You had left I guess by the time this Sports Illustrated article came out in '68. It was the article that stirred up a lot of controversy about UTEP and college sports and black athletes. Did you ever run across or were you involved in any of that or did you have any contact with some of the furor over that?

A: No, I wasn't involved in [that]. Like you [said] there was a couple of years after I left.

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M: Well, coming from Gary, you know, I assume the portion of Gary you came from was probably predominantly black?

A: Yes.

M: Did you feel particularly uncomfortable when you came to El Paso or did you feel that in general students were pretty receptive, pretty open?

A: Well, it wasn't...it had white at my high school. So, yes, I felt that they were pretty receptive because I don't know how many blacks Texas Western had at the time that I came down here but it was relatively few. But all in all, I never ran into any type of prejudice here in the city of El Paso.

M: Did the team ever have any problems when you travelled? I guess you went more to the west than over into the south for your games.

A: I remember one incident but I think that was my sophomore year when Jim Barnes was here. We played in a tournament in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and the hotel we went to, they didn't want to rent rooms to blacks. So they tried to separate us and I think it was Coach Haskins who said, "That's okay. We'll go to another hotel," or something. That was the only incident of that type, a bias type, I ran across in the four years that I was here.

M: Well, looking back on that game, the championship game, was winning the championship something that was important to you in the long run? Was it a high point or a key point in your life? Just what did it end up meaning to you?

A: Well, it meant a lot in the sense that it taught me that with a lot of hard work, you can almost accomplish anything. And just the experience of playing in the championship game in itself, it will mature you quicker, I believe. So, that's in itself, you know, maturity and then we

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all matured at that time, even underclassmen. They knew that this might not happen again, you know. Some of them had a couple more years to go but this was it. Either do or die at that time and we did. (Chuckles)

M: Is there anything else you can think of in particular about playing at Texas Western or that particular season?

A: No, not that I can think of. But you asked me earlier if I thought we would win at the beginning of the year, and I said, "No". But my sophomore year, when we had Jim Barnes, I thought we would; and that was the year I had thought we could win. I thought we had a good team. We all jelled together. I can't remember how many games we lost that year. Maybe two, maybe two games we lost and they were close games that we should have won. But I remember that Kansas State game that they beat us in the semi-finals at Wichita, Kansas, and they beat us by four points, and I think that was the worst game I ever played since I've been out here...the worst shooting game. I don't know if I hit any or scored any points, maybe two, two. In my opinion that was the worst game I ever played in the four years that I've been down here.

M: So '66 was where you were a little more cautious in what you thought you might do?

A: Right. That's correct.

M: But that was the one that ultimately ended up surprising some people.

A: Oh, it surprised a lot of people.

M: Well, maybe we'll finish on that note since our tape's about to end.

END OF TAPE