Don Haskins, Hall of Fame basketball coach and El Paso's own legend, died in his sleep late Sunday afternoon at his West Side home.

Dr. Dwayne Aboud, Haskins' doctor, said the cause of death was congestive heart failure. Haskins, who had been in poor health the past few months, died around 4:30 p.m. His wife, Mary, and his sons Brent and Steve were at the house. Haskins was 78.

Haskins was a legend in this city and in the world of basketball. He coached at UTEP for 38 years, winning 719 games and, of course, winning the 1966 NCAA championship. He was enshrined into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 1997. UTEP's basketball arena was named the Don Haskins Center in his honor at that time.

Nevil Shed, a member of that 1966 team, said from his home in San Antonio, "How can you describe a Don Haskins? I'm going to cry a little bit today. Boy did he put a lot of history on this Earth. I love him so much."

Brent Haskins said, "My father was beloved by the city of El Paso and he loved the city of El Paso as well. He was having such a hard time breathing. It was a very sad thing for everyone. But we are relieved that his pain is over. He had a lot of pain, although he never really said anything about it. We all told him we loved him before he passed away. He couldn't speak, but his eyes were open and we knew he knew what we were saying. My father was the most humble man I knew. He was so modest. He never cared about the attention he received."

Andress High School basketball coach Jim Forbes, who played for Don Haskins and served
as an assistant coach to him, said, "This is a sad
day. A lot of people saw him as tough. And he
was. But there was a lot more to him than just
that. We're all so sorry he's gone. We knew it was
coming, but when reality sets in ... he was this
tough guy who would walk into a room, walk into
a gym and everyone just stopped."

Nolan Richardson, who played on Haskins' first
Miner team and who went on to coach Arkansas
to an NCAA championship, said, "I was driving
from Tulsa back home to Fayetteville when I got
the news. This is a big loss for me, a big loss for
his family and, by family, I don't just mean Mary
and his sons, but for all the kids he touched.
There were so many, and they were family, too."

Haskins was born on March 14, 1930, in Enid,
Okla. His calf was burned badly as a small boy
and his father developed a weight to help him
build his leg back to full strength.

Haskins was cut from his first high school team
but worked tirelessly and came back to become
one of the top players in the state.

He played collegiately for the legendary Hall of
Fame coach Henry Iba at Oklahoma A&M, playing
for a team that was frequently ranked No. 1 in
the nation.

Haskins coached six-man football and boys and
girls basketball at Benjamin, Texas, High in
1955-56, coached boys and girls basketball at
Hedley High from 1956-1960 and boys basketball
at Dumas High in 1960. He came to Texas
Western in 1961 and remained in that position
until retiring in 1999.

"You're talking about a Hall of Fame coach here,"
current UTEP coach Tony Barbee said. "The
impact he had on this program and this school is
special."

Haskins most recently received national
recognition in the movie "Glory Road," the story
of Texas Western's 1966 national championship
run.

That team, the first to start five African-
American players against five whites (from the
University of Kentucky), is widely heralded as the
team that opened up college scholarships for
black athletes in the South and around the
nation.

"He did what he did because it was the right
thing to do," Barbee said. "Yet he opened the
doors for people like myself, an African
American, to play the game and become a head
coach in the NCAA. The players now may not
have felt his presence during the games and
practices. But they know how much of an impact
he's had on this program. They play in the
building that has his name, after all."

The news of Haskins' death traveled quickly
around the nation, reaching former players and
longtime friends and even some new friends in
all corners.

Josh Lucas, who played Haskins in "Glory Road,"
sent an e-mail: "God bless. It was nothing but a
total blessing to have been involved, even for a
Harry Flournoy, a member of the 1966 team who now lives in California, said, "It's a sad day. Not just for the basketball world but for the human race. If there were more men like Coach Haskins, we wouldn't have some of the problems we have. He was a great, great man."

Steve Tredennick, an attorney in the Austin suburb of Round Rock, played on Haskins' first Miner team.

"Coach Haskins would have fit perfectly into a John Wayne character in the movies," Tredennick said. "He had simple but very solid concepts of right and wrong and he taught you to do the right thing with your life. Those lessons were just pressed into us as players in that little arena of basketball practice, lessons necessary to succeed in basketball and lessons necessary to succeed in life. Coach Haskins would never be mistaken for Aristotle or Plato. But that is exactly what he was doing -- teaching those lessons in simple black and white."

Haskins had a long and successful run as a basketball coach at UTEP. He had many opportunities to leave El Paso. But he never did. El Paso became his home. He loved to hunt and fish and tell stories and coach basketball.

He always downplayed his success. Once, after winning his 500th game, he said, "Aw, that's really no big deal. If you stay around long enough, you'll win 500. Now 600, that's a big deal." After winning his 600th game, Don Haskins said, "Aw, that's no big deal ..."

Togo Railey, who played for Don Haskins in 1966 and returned to El Paso four years ago after a 20-year coaching career of his own, said, "He was a blessing to our lives. His spirit will live on in this town forever. It might be a fishing story or a hunting story or how brutal it was to play for him. But his spirit will live on in all those stories. He loved the people of El Paso."

And now a city is in mourning.

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El Paso Times reporter Gustavo Reveles Acosta contributed to this story.