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Coach With History of Winning

Mel Lewellen went to great lengths not to be a history teacher.

Now, 27 years later, he can look back and smile at the hard times and coaching career still based on two solid principles:

“For me to keep coaching,” says the winningest active coach in Western New York, “two things have to be in effect.”

“I have to be enjoying it, and I have to be convinced I’m making a positive contribution to the Maple Grove program.”

“If either one of those leave, I’ll turn it over to someone else.”

AT 53 YEARS old he’s still enjoying coaching - currently riding the crest of another undefeated season. And his contribution to the program is being felt wherever the talk of Maple Grove’s basketball dynasty.

It’s a dynasty that has found Maple Grove in the sectional playoffs 22 of the last 26 years, including the last 14 straight.

The Dragons have finished in third place or higher 25 of those 26 years, won eight league championships, four sectional championships and boasted three unbeaten seasons.

But Lewellen’s basketball success wasn’t that cut and dried.

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BORN IN INDIA, of missionary parents, Mel moved around the state, attending several different high schools.

“I’m not sure I am a native of any place ” he says.

He started at Houghton College, but was interrupted by World War II, and duty in the U.S.Navy.

When the war ended he knew what he wanted to do – coach basketball. But times had changed. Colleges were crowded and the only way you could still graduate was to return to the school you'd left, and the major you had then.

He graduated from Houghton majoring in history, then worked for a year.

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“WHILE IN the service I changed my mind. I did not want to teach history,” he recalls. He wanted to coach basketball, and where could he learn this better than the University of Kentucky, under Adolph Rupp.

The No. 1 college basketball school in the nation today was no different in 1949-51. Only the names changed.

Players like Alex Groza, Cliff Hagan, Frank Ramsey and Ralph Beard were the big names on campus in those years, as Rupp fielded three national championships in four seasons.

“The reason I went to Kentucky was because of Rupp,” admits Lewellen.

Also there, at the same time, was Bear Bryant as football coach. But it didn't work out. “Bryant wanted to be king. Adolph was king,” reflects Mel.

So Bryant moved on, to make his fans and fortune further south, at Alabama.

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LEWELLEN earned his masters' degree in physical education from Kentucky in the spring of 1951 and in the 1951-52 season finally settled down in Bemus Point.

The job was athletic director, basketball and baseball coach. The only other sports going were six-man football, and tennis. But it was a start.

Why a small school for a man who'd given his heart to basketball.

"I'm happy at a small school because we know the kids," he admits. "It's not like a basketball factory. You see the kids in all walks of life."

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MEL TAKES particular pride in the athletes he's coached who have joined the coaching ranks. People like Bill Jowett (Falconer), Gunny Anderson (Southwestern athletic director), Chuck Wuertzer (a coach now in Kentucky), Bob Gustafson (on his own coaching staff) and Wally Carlson (also on the Maple Grove staff).

And he takes special pride in own children, all in physical ranks, former Randolph football coach Scott Lewellen, University of Dayton graduate assistant Wendy and Wooster (O.) College freshman David.

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HIS MEMORIES go deep over the years. He recalls the 1962-63 team, won-7- lost-11, his only losing season.

"We started four sophomores and a senior. Two years later they redeemed themselves," he beams proudly, talking of his undefeated 1964-65 campaign.

The Dragons - still known as Bemus Point at that time - won their first 19 games the following year and looked like a cinch to extend their string to a second undefeated season.

Forestville was the opposition in the sectional finals, in Memorial Auditorium, a team Bemus Point had beaten twice before, but not this time.

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ANTOHER TEAM that churns the memories – not too distant memories at that – is the 1975-76 squad. “We beat Portville in the final at Erie Community College South,” he recalls. They had beaten us the year before.”

John Hillebrand (Virginia Polytechnic Institute) and Mark Sleggs (St. Bonaventure University junior varsity) were the start of that team which upset Bennett before losing to Niagara Falls.

The game has changed, but Lewellen has changed with it.

“When I first started it was man-for-man or a 2-1-2 zone. The biggest change has been the numerous sophisticated defenses you must be prepared for – matchup zones, combination defenses, four-cornered stalls,” he says.

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ANOTHER SOURCE of pride to Lewellen is his role as athletic director. “The biggest change has been the number of sports. A boy or girl has the opportunity to compete,” he says, listing 10 boys and five girls sports now available at Maple Grove, far cry from the four sports available le back in 1951.

For a small school, this is quite a thing,” he beams.

His role as a basketball coach and athletic director is as strong as ever, and Lewellen still teaches five physical-education classes a day, is cross-country coach in the fall, serves on county and sectional committees and is in charge of the summer youth recreation program at Chautauqua Institution.

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BUT THE BIGGEST thing is 27 years of coaching is still the athletes, themselves.

“I consider then all my personal friends,” he sums up. I’m interested in theme not only as basketball players but as individuals.

The man born in India, who never attended the same high school 2 straight years, finally found a home.

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