

Mel's Milestone

Coach Has Left His Mark, On And Off The Hardwood

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Sherman girls basketball coach Mel Swanson is surrounded by his players after the Lady Wildcats' victory over Maple Grove on Tuesday night in a non-league game. The win was the 600th of Swanson's career. P-J photos by Scott Reagle

Exactly two years ago, Mel Swanson received a letter from the National Federation of State High School Associations in Indianapolis.

A portion of its contents, retrieved from Mel's file at the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame where he was enshrined in 2015, reads as follows:

"You have been selected to receive the 2014 Northeast Sectional Coach of the Year award for the sport of girls basketball. The Northeast section includes the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont."

"... Your contributions to high school athletics are truly deserving of our recognition and appreciation."

Mel's coaching resume from a nearly 40-year career at Sherman Central School added another significant entry Tuesday night. In fact, with the Lady Wildcats' victory over Maple Grove, Swanson, 62, now has 600 career victories directing the girls program. For perspective, that milestone places him third on the state's all-time list, according to the New York State Public High School Athletic Association.



Sherman Central School girls basketball coach Mel Swanson poses for a photo with his team after the Lady Wildcats held off Maple Grove on Tuesday night for his 600th career victory with the program.

P-J photos by Scott Reagle

Mel and Mary Swanson's children — Nolan, Patrick, Lesley and Ryan — couldn't be any prouder.

Mel graduated from Panama Central School in 1972 and from SUNY Fredonia in 1977. Eighteen months later, he was teaching and coaching his first girls basketball team at Sherman, although he didn't initially meet with much success on the hardwood. In fact, his record the first three seasons was a combined 10-32, including a 0-14 mark to start, but he began to gain some traction in 1981-82 (12-9), followed by 20-win seasons in 1982-83 and 1983-84. Twenty-five years later, Mel had the Lady Wildcats playing in the state championship game at Hudson Valley Community College.

The ascendance of the program is not lost on Nolan, who was a multi-sport talent at Sherman in the early 1990s.

“I honestly feel that Sherman has a ‘Coach K’ working in their school,” said Nolan, now the co-owner of Pinehurst Golf Club in Westfield. “He is the best coach I’ve ever seen. He gets everything out of each of his players. They play hard for him. He teaches loyalty, accountability and hard work.”

In addition to coaching the Sherman girls varsity team for nearly four decades, Mel has also called the shots, at various times, for Sherman’s varsity boys, its junior varsity boys and girls squads, and the junior high boys and girls teams.

When all the games at all levels are added together, Mel has well over 1,000 career basketball victories. A substantial number of those wins came when his own children were Wildcats. In fact, in addition to coaching Lesley on the girls varsity team, Mel also spent two seasons coaching the boys varsity upon the death of longtime coach Frank Wasylink.

Patrick, now the Chautauqua County district attorney, recalled the night Sherman defeated Ripley in quadruple overtime as particularly memorable.

“(The game was) at Ripley in front of a standing-room-only crowd (in) the 1995-96 season when my father was coaching both mine and Lesley’s teams,” Patrick said. “Obviously, my team struggled mightily with the loss of Frank (at age 54) the October before my senior year. ... My father did everything he could for us.”

That night, which would have been Wasylink’s 55th birthday, Sherman prevailed in an epic game.

“After the final horn, it was bedlam,” Patrick said. “The crowd swarmed the floor. What I remember about my dad is consistent with what a lifetime of experience has taught me about him. He was immensely proud of another one of his teams ... something that has been consistent for 40 years — win or lose. Personally, it was the best father-son moment of the season. After the game, my father pulled me aside and all he said was, ‘I’m proud of you.’ That’s it. The feeling of satisfaction I had was amazing.”

That same season, Mel coached Sherman’s girls team to a Section VI championship, which meant knocking off perennial Class D powerhouse Pine Valley, coached by Tim Nobles, for the first time in years.

“It wasn’t just the sheer unbridled joy we felt from such a success — and here, I must give credit to Coach Nobles for what he did to build up such a program and great players, too,” said Lesley, the married mother of two who lives in suburban Atlanta. “What I remember most was when we got home, and dad looked me in the eye and said how unbelievably proud he was of me, that I was ‘his star’ (daughter) and recalled all the hard work his girls chose to put in over the summer and years prior.

“I was, and always will be, his daughter first, but being one of his players, I will treasure (that) forever.”

Ryan Swanson, who is the co-owner with Nolan of Pinehurst Golf Club, had a unique perspective as his father juggled two programs in the mid-1990s.

“Being the youngest by a lot, I was lucky enough to grow up in the gym while my brothers and sister were practicing,” Ryan said. “Some of my best memories at Sherman were managing Patrick’s team while dad was doing double duty with girls and boys varsity, and being behind him on the bench.”

And when his older siblings moved on to college — Nolan and Patrick to Wake Forest and Lesley to Houghton — Ryan said he was like an “only child,” which allowed him to “go into the gym and have the place to myself with dad.”

“He was a heck of a rebounder, fetching all my ‘bricks,’” Ryan added. “Those countless times with just him, looking back, were great and went by too fast. Despite what everyone thought, he never pushed me too hard and demanded excellence. He simply gave me pointers and taught me basketball.”

There were lessons beyond the hardwood, though.

For Ryan, they extended to golf where he ultimately played for four years at St. Bonaventure and is now the coach of the Bonnies' team.

"I was lucky enough to have him as my golf 'coach' (in high school)," Ryan said. "(Coach) is in quotations because I started beating him around sixth grade, so he was more of a chaperone and bus driver. However, playing for him from seventh grade through 12th grade is probably why I am still in the golf business and still trying to play competitively a little bit. He made it fun, but he brought a competitiveness to high school golf that was unmatched.

"In my opinion, there really isn't a better coach, doesn't even matter the sport. He finds a way to get the most out of every player he has on his roster."

Even if it's the unlikeliest of heroes.

While Nolan was an all-state basketball player and cross country runner as a Wildcat, he also played baseball, which was coached, naturally, by his father.

"We were playing Mayville, (which) was in first place." Nolan recalled. "Dad said he'd walk home if we won. We had a guy that never hit the ball, (but) he hit a grand slam in the game and we won. Dad walked from Mayville to Sherman. He had mom bring him shoes, since he was coaching in cleats."

Added Patrick: "(Dad) walks the 9 miles home. ... Fantastic ... What a day."

At the end of this basketball season, Mel will retire after nearly four decades of practices, games, bus rides and championships.

"Certainly, now, and 10, 20, 30 years from now," Ryan said, "you will not be able to have a conversation about basketball coaches in Western New York and Chautauqua County without mentioning Mel Swanson."

Added Patrick: "I know that he will miss it. That's why he's been on the 'three-more-years' plan for the last eight years. It's full circle this year, though. ... His seniors were members of his last sixth-grade class. It's a fitting way to go."

But all four of Mel's kids believe his legacy will live on.

"He leads by setting an example you'd be foolish not to recognize as honorable," Patrick said. "I think what you will learn if you talk to his former players is that he made his mark ... whatever it was. In some way, Mel Swanson provided his athletes something that each athlete could draw upon in their everyday life. I am proud to call him my father."