

Turning programs around a specialty for Ron Bradley

By Steve Figueroa
Assistant Sports Editor

LOGANVILLE

When Ron Bradley

took over the Newton County High School boys basketball program in 1958, the school had never won a region championship.

When he came to Loganville last season, the Red Devils has posted only one winning season (12-10 in 1989-90) since 1957.

What Bradley did at Newton County has become Georgia legend. What he is doing at Loganville may be headed in that same direction.

Bradley came to Loganville last season as the state's winningest active coach with more than 1,000 victories in boys and girls play in 35 seasons. Even with those impressive credentials, the Loganville community wasn't prepared for what happened.

Anxious just for a winning team, Bradley instead transformed the perennial doormat into a 23-4 powerhouse. And just to prove last year wasn't a fluke, Bradley has his Red Devils off to a 12-3 start this season, only losing to three state-ranked teams.

"We came here at the right time," Bradley said. "These people wanted some success and they were willing to do what it took to have some."

Whenever Bradley takes over a program, it seems like it just happens to be the right time.

At Newton, he took the Rams to a 17-year record of 430-68 which included a national high school record 129-game home winning streak, which lasted from Dec. 11, 1959 to Dec. 29, 1967. The school that never had won a region title before his arrival won nine under

Bradley's guidance, adding the state crown in 1963-64.

Similar success followed at Georgia Walton Academy and Trinity Christian in the Georgia Independent Scholastic Association.

The grand result is that midway through his 36th season as a boys coach, Bradley owns a record of 791-184. Combined with his 15-year girls coaching record of 313-79, Bradley had an overall record of 1,104-263 after Tuesday night's thrilling win against Athens Academy.

"I've been fortunate enough to be around some very outstanding young people over the years," Bradley said. "One of the reasons I took this job is that the situation here is similar to the one at Newton County. This place has caught fire."

Bradley started the spark by improving the facilities and organizing the players. The community, long starved for a winner, turned the spark into a blaze.

"They had not had much success here and they just got excited and decided they wanted to win," Bradley said. "We have gotten great support here from the community and we've been able to do a lot of things as a result."

Bradley is as good an Xs and Os man as there is in the state, but he also believes strongly in the trappings. If you want to be a winner, look like a winner.

"We've been able to take the kids places, feed them and dress them right," Bradley said. "Everything is first class. As a result, we've gotten a first-class effort from the players."

And the cupboard wasn't completely bare. Bradley has found some material from which to shape his miracle turnaround.

Four of Loganville's starters average in double figures this season, led by 6-foot-1 junior guard Zeb Reed at 19 points per game. Mike Dunn, a 6-3 senior, is next at 18 ppg, and 6-5 junior Travis Stephens averages 13.

Ti Wilder, a 6-7, 220-pound junior who is considered a college prospect, averages 14 points and 14.6 rebounds a game. His 29 boards against Social Circle earlier this season set a school record.

Besides talent, Bradley found something else at Loganville, something that has made it easier for him to implement the change from loser to winner.

"This is a very intelligent group," Bradley said. "The average grade on our entire roster is 90. They've been a real joy to work with."

"One of the hardest things to do when you take over a program like this is to sell the players on what you are trying to do. But most of these kids have been real receptive to what we've asked of them."

Even at that, Bradley has to be pleasantly surprised the turnaround has come so quickly, right?

"Well, let's just say that if somebody had told me we'd have this kind of record at this point, I'd have taken it," Bradley said with a laugh. "On the other hand, I want to win every game, so I'm not quite satisfied with what we've done."

At 61, it's doubtful Bradley will spend the 17 seasons at Loganville he did at Newton County; but then, he has no plans to leave anytime soon.

"I'll stay just as long as they want me," he said. "I've never found anything else I enjoy as much as coaching."