

Port St. Joe replaces Eppinette

EXPERIENCE: Bradley brings his own success to Sharks' program.

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PORT ST. JOE — One legend out, another one — finally — in as Port St. Joe boys basketball coach.

After a summer-long search to replace the highly successful Vernon Eppinette, Port St. Joe principal Chris Earley announced Tuesday morning that Ronald Bradley has been hired to take over the Sharks' program.

"With the situation we were in with Coach Eppinette, he had about as much experience and expertise as you can get," Earley said. "I think we've just continued that tradition with this coach."

At 65 years old, Bradley is loaded with 40 years of experience as a high school basketball, football, baseball and golf coach — all in Georgia.

Word was Eppinette's shoes were too large to fill for many candidates. But Bradley's list of feats are numerous.

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A glance:

■ Bradley has led teams to four Georgia state championships — three in boys basketball and one in football.

■ His 1,198 career basketball victories — 845 boys and 353 girls — rank among the most in Georgia history.

■ Bradley was inducted into the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in 1997 and was the first basketball coach to ever receive the Georgia Athletic Coaches Association's Circle of Achievement Award.

Bradley spent the 1997-98 and 1998-99 school years coaching football, basketball, golf and track at Piedmont High School in Monticello, Ga., before taking the 1999-2000 school year off.

"I traveled last year, and this year I was ready to go again," Bradley said. "Port St. Joe was a good fit. It was something different. I liked the idea of going to an area where no one knew us."

Bradley is somewhat familiar with Gulf County. He has owned a condominium in Bay County since 1972 and met with Mosley officials last year about the vacant boys basketball job there.

Bradley's son, who lives in Bay County, informed his father about the opening at Port St. Joe after reading about the position in a newspaper.

"After quite a bit of time and jumping through some hoops, I finally got the job," Bradley said.

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A graduate of the University of Georgia, where he played baseball and basketball, Bradley began his coaching career in 1957 at Newton County High School in Covington, Ga. There, Bradley won his first state boys basketball championship in 1964 and led the team to a national-record 129 straight victories at home.

In January of this year, Newton County named its gymnasium after Bradley.

"Having a gym named after you is quite special," Bradley said. "To have it happen at any time is special. But to have it happen so many years after I left — when all the faces have changed and all the kids have changed — was one of the great honors of my life."

Bradley coached at Newton County for 18 years and followed with stints at George Walton Academy in Monroe (12 years), Trinity Christian in Dublin (five years) and Loganville (three years) before the two-year stop at Piedmont.

At all of those schools, Bradley took over programs without much tradition. At Port St. Joe, Bradley inherits a program with five state titles in the last seven seasons.

"It will be difficult to maintain what's gone on there for so long under Coach Eppinette," Bradley said. "I'm going to try and take advantage of the opportunity to keep those strengths going and overcome any weaknesses they might have there."

"Goodness, if I can leave there with the people having the same respect for me as they do for Coach Eppinette, that would be great."

Bradley was one of two candidates Earley interviewed over the last two weeks. John Marion, an assistant coach at Chowan College in Murfreesboro, N.C., was the other.

Earley originally offered the job to Bay coach Rob Williams in July, but Williams chose to stay with the Tornadoes.

Eppinette resigned this past spring after compiling a 260-64 record in 10 seasons at Port St. Joe. The Sharks won state championships under Eppinette in 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999. Port St. Joe's quest for a fifth straight state title ended with a loss to Hialeah Champagnat Catholic in this year's Class 2A championship game.

"It's been a tremendous strain," Earley said of the search to replace Eppinette. "We have a great tradition here and in my opinion we had to hire a coach who could continue the quality that we've had here in the past."