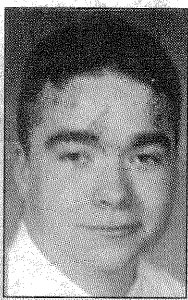


COMMENTARY

Win or lose, special team deserves to be remembered

Amazed? You bet I am.

When this high school basketball season tipped off three months ago, I had about as much hope for the Newton boys' basketball team as I did for peace succeeding in the Middle East. Not because I doubted the coach or the players, but because of the cut-throat region



**Brian
Knapp**
Sports Editor

they were about to enter.

There aren't too many leagues in the state, at any classification, that test you top to bottom like 2-AAAAA does. Consider how well the teams from the region performed in the

state playoffs this week. All four advanced, and Tri-Cities, the No. 4 seed, won its showdown with 4-AAAAA champion Newnan by 24 points.

That the list of Sweet 16 teams includes Newton blows my mind. I figured I'd be gearing up for baseball and those 35-degree March nights by now. Instead, I'm just along for the ride.

And it might not end for a while.

With Coffee's upset of eighth-ranked Savannah in the bottom half of Newton's bracket, the Rams have a real chance to reach the Final Four. Should they beat Lowndes Thursday, all that would stand in their way is Coffee or Douglass, a team they have already beaten twice, once by 31 points.

Few outside our box realize how special, how unlikely, this season has been. At the start, I quietly wondered if the Rams would be able to break .500 and might have taken the bet with someone who thought they could.

That all changed when Newton played its very first region game of the year. Riverdale walked in here with all the hype, with a sophomore that might someday play at Duke, with a coach who had state championship rings on each hand and got beat.

It was then that we were awakened to the possibilities, to the idea that something beyond our grasp might happen.

See Knapp page 4B

Coach: Could become fourth to reach 1,300 wins

From page 2B

The mood surrounding the Rams has done a 180 since, and here they are in the Sweet Sixteen for just the second time in 31 years, a win shy of the state quarterfinals.

With only one player — senior center John Monk — standing 6-foot-5 or taller, Newton thrived in one of the state's harshest regions, proved it could compete and ultimately played for the 2A AAAA championship.

How did it happen?

"They've been accountable," Bradley said. "When you feel like young people are receptive, when you feel like they're trying to do the right thing, they're fun to work with."

Strategy, patience and fundamentals have outweighed size, strength and talent on most nights. Newton won eight of its 14 regular-season games and two playoff games against region opposition.

It truly has been a Cinderella season. The only question that remains is ... does the slipper still fit?

"This has been an awesome year, regardless of what happens," Bradley said. "It's hard to believe what this team has accomplished. I have a lot of respect for what these young men have done."

Touching lives

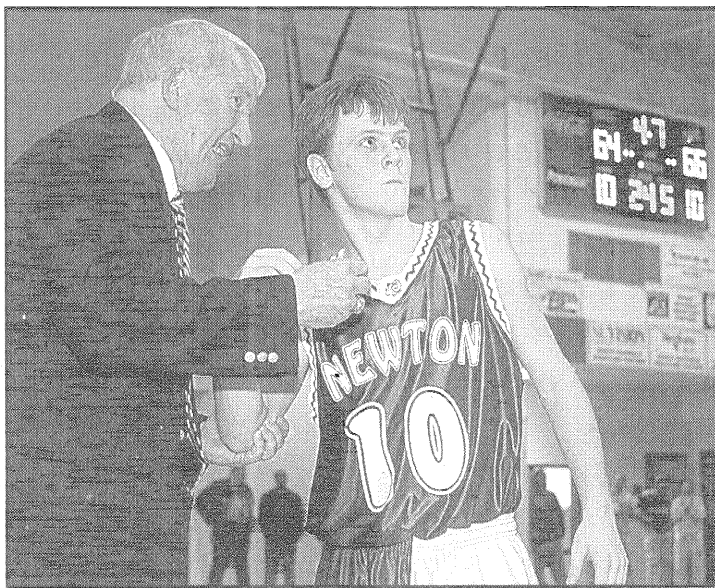
No stranger to recognition, Bradley's career is crowded with honors and achievement. Even now, in the twilight of his storied run, Bradley teaches the game better than anyone else.

In 2004, he was chosen as national coach of the year by the National High School Athletic Coaches Association and the National Federation of State High School Associations, becoming the first coach in state history to hold both awards in the same year.

Former players still revere him.

"He just knows how to get the best out of people," said Stan Harris, who played for Bradley in the 1960s. "He always taught us preparation and discipline, and those things carry over in life. I'll always remember his fairness. Even though he was a good disciplinarian, he was always fair."

A legendary local figure, Bradley became the state's all-time winningest boys' basketball coach a year ago this month, supplanting the late Eric Staples with his 925th victory. Staples' record of 924



Ron Manson/The Covington News

In-game tension: Newton head coach Ron Bradley, left, discusses strategy with former point guard Justin Herring during a game against Rockdale County in 2003.

wins as a boys' coach had stood for more than four decades. Bradley's 946 wins rank him seventh nationally.

In fact, Bradley has passed two historic milestones since he returned to coach at Newton prior to the 2001-02 season. He jetted past D.B. Carroll as the state's all-time winningest high school basketball coach (boys and girls) with win No. 1,255 in January 2003.

"You like to feel like you're touching lives," Bradley said. "You want to make young people feel special. That's your job."

Enshrined in the State of Georgia Sports Hall of Fame in 1997, Bradley has also been recognized by the Georgia Athletic Coaches Association as the first basketball coach ever to receive its Circle of Achievement Award. And in 2000, the Atlanta Tipoff Club named him as its Steve Schmidt Award winner for his outstanding contributions to the game.

Currently in his second tour with Newton, he led the school to its only state championship back in 1964 and directed his teams to a national-record 129 consecutive home wins during one 9-year span. He has won 24 region championships and three state titles over an unparalleled career that has spanned six different decades.

Michael Jordan had not even been born when he started coaching in 1959.

"For me," Bradley said, "it's about the love of the game."

Been here before

Ron Bradley had not yet turned 30 when it happened, when it all came together like

he had planned.

He had won 130 of his first 146 games at Newton County High School and would go on to win over 1,100 more, but as he walked into his sixth season with the Rams, Bradley found himself in search of the signature victory that would define him as a coach.

He found it in 1964.

The 1964 Newton boys' basketball team won its first 27 games, shook off one controversial defeat and then won its last eight games by an average of 16 points, crushing Hart County by 22 points in the Class AA State Tournament championship game before 6,200 at the Georgia Tech Coliseum in Atlanta.

The Rams finished 35-1 and gave birth to the icon Ron Bradley has since become.

"What I remember most about 1964 is just how special those kids were and the commitment the town made to them," Bradley said. "It was a fantastic period."

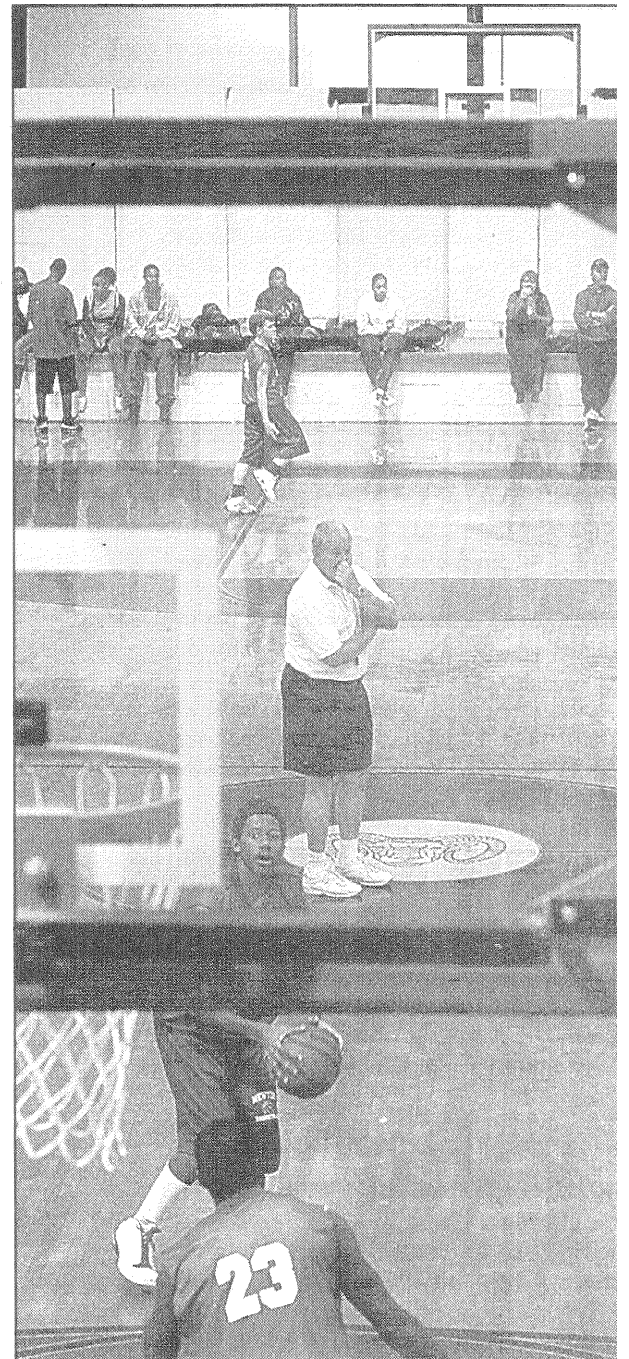
The coach and his 11 players that year formed an unbreakable bond that still exists today. They were the perfect match, according to Bob Richardson, a sophomore in 1964.

"It all started with Coach Bradley," Richardson said. "He had a brilliant basketball mind. On top of that, he got players to buy into his program, which consisted basically of being fundamentally sound."

"It wasn't an accident that we practiced fundamentals six months out of the year. When it came down to crunch time, we didn't dribble the ball off of our leg or miss free throws; we knew what to do. People talk about how lucky we were. The harder you work, the luckier you get."

Bradley's methods and tireless work ethic instilled belief, confidence and fear in his players. They knew they were expected to get the job done, and they did it.

"It all goes back to our coach," Eddie Hinton, the state championship team's lone freshman, said. "He was probably the hardest-working person I've seen in my life. I don't think we'll see anybody like him again."



Ron Manson/The Covington News

Keeping watch: Newton head coach Ron Bradley stands on the midcourt circle and watches over practice.