



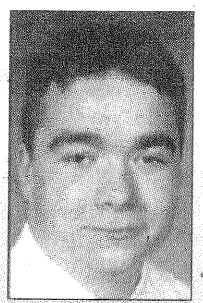
THE RETIREMENT OF RONALD M. BRADLEY

# End of an era

## COMMENTARY

### It's doubtful we'll ever see a coach like Bradley again

Oddly enough, I was standing on a football field — not a basketball court — the first time I crossed paths with the great Ron Bradley. And in his case, the word “great” fits like Dorothy’s red slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*.



**Brian Knapp**  
Sports Editor

In the summer of 1998, I pulled into the parking lot at Piedmont Academy in Monticello and walked up to the man I had only heard about, my hand extended on a humid, mid-summer morning.

“I’m Brian with The Covington News,” I said, my voice shaken by a natural respect.

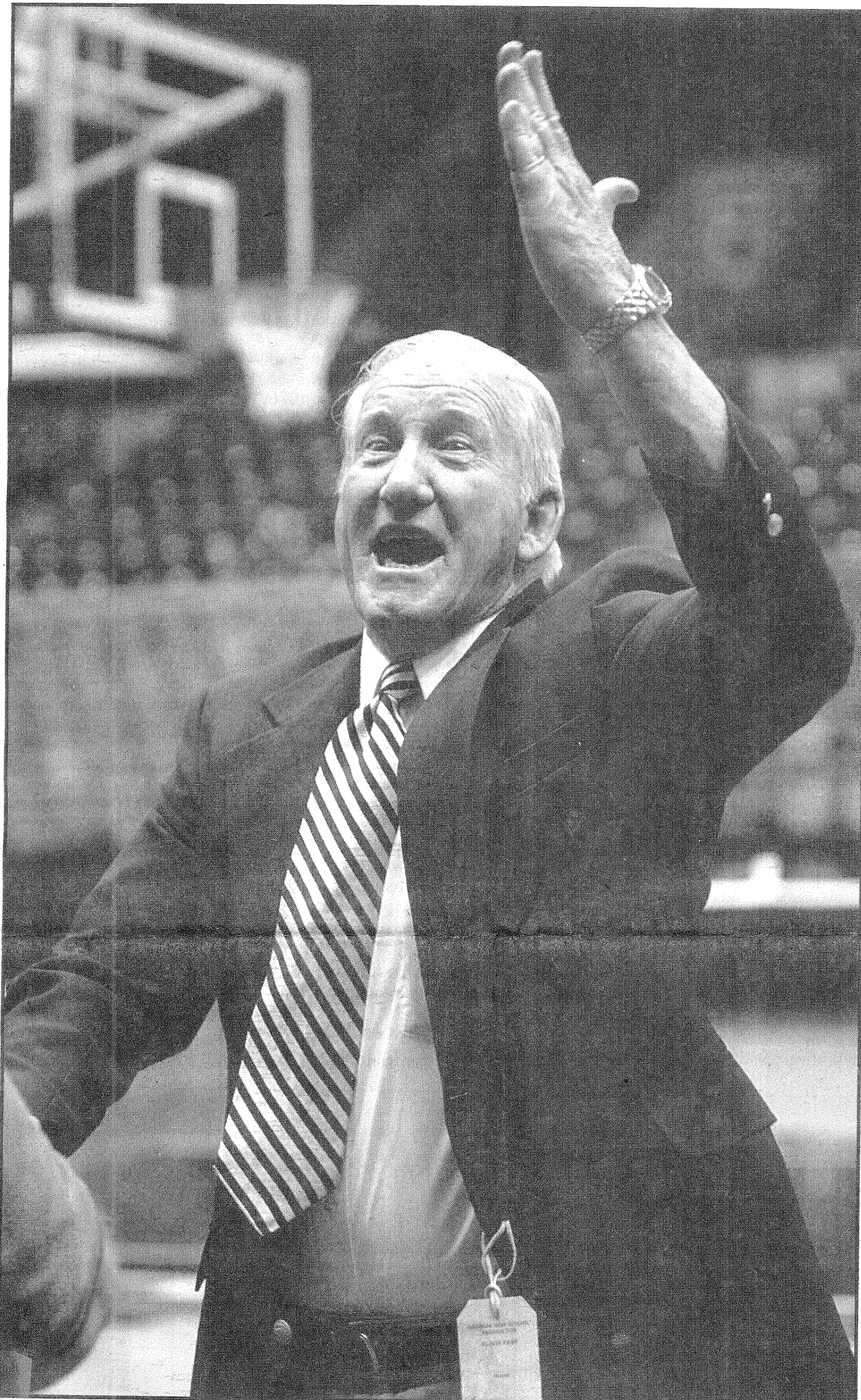
“I know who you are,” he said with a teathy, welcoming response.

I had turned 20 two months earlier and, to be quite honest, didn’t know my rear end from a dugout. But I knew who Ron Bradley was — everybody who grows up in Newton County knows — and I was floored he knew who I was. Twenty is strange age, an age where you’re caught between the teen-aged feeling of invincibility and wondering where you fit in the world’s grand scheme.

That’s what makes Bradley different from everyone else. He cares genuinely about the people who care themselves, about those who want their lives to amount to something. If he’s a professional at anything, it’s at making people feel like they matter.

The next time I met face-to-face with Ron Bradley was in January of 2000, a few days prior to his gym dedication at Turner Lake Park. I had my feet under me by then, and he and his wife Jan sat across the table from me and gave me my first glimpse of their wonderful world. We talked about everything under the sun — and some things above it — but mostly we discussed people.

Near the end of our interview I asked Bradley what he remembered most about his career as a coach. He paused, looking down



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

**A kiss goodbye:** Retiring Newton head coach Ron Bradley blows a kiss to the crowd of supporters that had gathered at the Macon Coliseum for his team’s state quarterfinal victory over Douglass last month.

## Fallen player ‘stays young’ in coach’s thoughts

Brian Knapp

### Storybook sendoff: Rams write ideal end

**Brian Knapp**

bknapp@covnews.com

It was a fitting bookend to an unrivaled coaching career that spanned the United States presidential election of 1964 to 2004.

The Newton High School boys’ basketball team won 21 games, including a championship in what many argue is the state’s toughest regular season schedule.

“All year long, I could tell this team was going to be something special. But to get to the Final Four? No one could have dreamed that”

— Ron Bradley

outgoing head coach, Newton High School boys’ basketball team

was the most surprising team I’ve been a part of,” Bradley said. “I was thinking we’d be thrilled just to win the state championship. When we saw the schedule, we weren’t sure we’d make it. We won five of the 10 road games.”

None of his regulars — from Mike Hoskins to Trent Brown to Rudy to John Monk — stood taller than 6-foot-4. None of them, except for Mike Boswell, was regarded as super-talented material outside the inner circle. More than 15 weeks, they walked among giants, paying attention to the details that were in their control.

The Rams were underdogs in their three state tournament victories, first to ninth-ranked East Coweta, then to 1-AAAAA champion Lowndes County, and finally to region rival Douglass.

What the Rams accomplished between November and March will soon be forgotten. They were twice shy of their first state championship in 41 years when they fell to eventual champion Wheeler, a team that closed a single game in state all year.

That Newton even made it to the state tournament, most would agree, bordered on the miraculous.

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Near the end of our interview I asked Bradley what he remembered most about his career as a coach. He paused, took a deep breath and, with tears welling in his eyes, introduced me to Billy Dean Rutledge, one of his former players who drowned tragically decades before I was born.

You see ... that's what really matters to Ron Bradley, not records, not wins or losses, not how he's perceived by those who've never taken the opportunity to get to know him. Does he have his flaws? Sure. Who doesn't?

But he cares deeply about people, which is why he has been so successful for such a long time. He was no comet. His philosophy stood the test of generations, crossed racial barriers and bridged vastly different eras.

Make no mistake, I am a blessed person. Over the past four years, I've been afforded the opportunity to work alongside one of the greatest coaches in history — at any level. I won't list numbers and achievements here, because that's not how he'll be measured by those who knew him.

Me? I was just in the right place at the right time.

See Bradley page 2B



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

**A kiss goodbye:** Retiring Newton head coach Ron Bradley blows a kiss to the crowd of supporters that had gathered at the Macon Coliseum for his team's state quarterfinal victory over Douglass last month.

## Fallen player 'stays young' in coach's thoughts

**Brian Knapp**

bknapp@covnews.com

No player — perhaps no other person outside of his wife of 50 years — had as significant an impact on Ron Bradley's coaching career than did Billy Dean Rutledge.

In July 1959, Rutledge left for a fishing trip on the Alcovy River and never came home. His untimely drowning death at 18 years of age shook the community where he lived and the coach for whom he had played at Newton County High School.

Bradley, 24 at the time, remembers it like it was yesterday.

"I was umpiring a softball game, and some of my players pulled up in a pickup truck," Bradley said. "They said, 'Coach, we can't find Billy Dean.' I remember jumping in the water hunting for him."

Innocence had been lost and a man changed forever. No other event impact-



Ron Manson/The Covington News

**Top of the mountain:** Ron Bradley celebrates his record-setting 1,255th career win with wife Jan in 2003.

ed Bradley the same way.

More than 2,000 people crammed into the old Porterdale Gym for Billy Dean's memorial service, celebrating a life that had been snuffed out far too soon. A blue and white flo-

ral basketball hung in one of the hoops, a subtle reminder of his love for the game.

"One of the things I'll always remember is [my wife] Jan leaning over and saying 'I'll never complain

about the amount of time you spend with young people again,'" Bradley said. "When you lose a young person like that, they stay young forever."

Bradley retired as Newton High School's boys' basketball coach Tuesday, nearly 46 years after Rutledge's untimely death. He admits that he still thinks about him nearly every day.

"Not many days go by," Bradley said. "I'll always remember him calling the house, wanting to get in the gym."

No other player has ever worn the No. 13 — the number that belonged to Billy Dean Rutledge — for Bradley again. Perhaps it's only fitting that he walks away with a career win total that has a "13" attached to it.

"I think it's kind of interesting," Bradley said. "I didn't think there was any way I could get to 1,300. Even today, I think about him."

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— Ron Bradley

outgoing head coach,  
Newton High School  
boys' basketball team

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What the Rams accomplished between November and March soon be forgotten. They were shy of their first state championship 41 years when they fell to champion Wheeler, a team that lost a single game in state.

That Newton even made it most would agree, bordered miraculous.

"We had a group of young people a lot of heart," Bradley said. "We wish we could have played against Wheeler, but even though we lost in Atlanta, it was a wonderful part of."

What's even more staggering is the fact that Newton County, a nationally ranked South Georgia school which went home in the round.

"All year long, I could tell it was going to be something special," Bradley said. "But to get to Four? No one could have dreamed that."

Bradley had his first premiership at least publicly, that something special might be on the horizon when the Rams defeated 93-86 after falling behind by 16 points in the fourth quarter.

Not since Carl Stevenson had led Newton back to points down with 1:51 to go. Cedar Shoals in 1974 had he such a surreal move by one of them. He knew then the impossible was possible.

"They're just amazing," Bradley said afterwards. "It will be interesting if they're destined to do something unusual."

They were and they did.

# COLLEGE of choice



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

**On the dotted line:** Newton High School quarterback Brandon Heath, seated center, signs a national letter of intent with Maryville College, a Div. III school in Maryville, Tenn. Also pictured are Heath's parents, William, front left, and Wanda Heath, Newton assistant coach Kevin Reach, back left, Newton principal Dave Easterday and Newton head coach Ben Reaves. Heath totaled 2,406 all-purpose yards in his final year under center with the Rams. He completed better than 50 percent of his pass attempts for 1,398 yards and 12 touchdowns and led Newton in rushing with 948 yards and 10 TDs. Heath will play for third-year head coach Tony Ierulli, who has worked previously under former Auburn head coach Terry Bowden at Samford and current Georgia Tech head coach Chan Gailey with the Birmingham Fire of the World Football League. The Fighting Scots, who will join the USA South Conference this fall, went 5-5 in 2004, enjoying their first non-losing season since 1999.

# Knapp: Legends few, far between

From page 1B

Even from afar, I've learned from Ron Bradley. Meeting someone like that forces you to take inventory on your life, on what you're doing to leave the world in better shape than you find it. He's one of those rare people — most of us can count them on one hand — who impacts the lives of everyone he comes into contact with, whether they realize it or not.

So it was with mixed feelings that I learned this week of Bradley's retirement as the head coach of the Newton High School boys' basketball team. I'm happy for him, his wife and their family, eternally grateful that I had an opportunity to be there for at least part of his storied ride and deeply saddened for this community, which is losing one of the strongest influences it had on young people here.

I've thought a lot about the experiences I've shared with the Bradleys, the people they've brought me into contact with and the great stories they've allowed me to tell.

And I realize that no matter where my career takes me (if it takes me anywhere), I'll always look back on this as an extraordinarily special window in my life, a window I can tell my kids and grandkids about some day, a window that is now officially closed.

Without overdoing it, I can safely assume I'll never have the opportunity to work with a man like Ron Bradley again. There's only one. Of this, I am certain.

Sports editor Brian Knapp can be reached via e-mail at [bknapp@covnews.com](mailto:bknapp@covnews.com).

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# its Eagles in 8-AAAA opener

The Eagles scored their two runs on seven hits but left seven men on base — three at third base.

"We didn't hit the ball as well as we should," Jones said. "We got some hits, but we just didn't get them when they counted."

Heritage (5-3, 1-0 Region 8-AAAA) pounced on Eastside early, scoring twice in the top of the first inning on an RBI double from Bo Hansen and a run-scoring single from former Newton prospect Brandon Owens.

Behind 3-0, Eastside threat-

ened in its half of the second inning, putting runners on the corners as Bryan Pittman doubled and Jacob Cowan singled. Cowan then stole second, but two strikeouts and a fielder's choice curbed the threat.

The Eagles held the Patriots at bay briefly, turning a 7-6-3 double play in the third inning.

After catching a fly ball in left field, Bryan Shepherd threw a strike to Stephen Cole, who then made a perfect relay throw to first, nailing a Heritage runner who had strayed too far from the bag.

Cole homered in the bottom of the inning, cutting into the Heritage lead.

Eastside squandered the momentum, however, and the Patriots escaped the inning with a 3-1 lead.

Both teams scored again in the fourth inning, but the Eagles were not heard from again.

Heritage, meanwhile, scored another run in the sixth and two more in the seventh to put the game out of reach.

Eastside collides with Salem at 5:30 p.m. today in Conyers.

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