

The Living Legend

Bradley Still Winning

After All These Years

By JERRY GRILLO

To hear the victims speak, you'd think Newton County's basketball team had little to do with its 129-game winning streak at home.

It was the lights, going off and on. And the birds hovering over the court. It was the tightly packed oven that passed for a gym. Or, according to one visiting coach, it was the local sheriff.

"He claims we were playing one of our neighbor schools and we were behind by six points late in the game," said Ron Bradley, the architect of Newton's record streak, and about 1,000 other victories in his high school coaching career.

"Supposedly, the sheriff was on one end of the court and he called the refs over and said, 'It looks like we could lose because of your incompetence.' Then he showed them the door at the other end of the court and said, 'If we happen to lose, you better rush to that door, and I'll try to help you if I can, but I'm not promising.'"

WHATEVER the case, Newton did not lose that night. In fact, the Rams, and any other team coached by Bradley over the past 36 years, rarely ever lost. But it is the 129-game home winning streak that put Newton and Bradley on the map in the minds of high school basketball fans all over the South. The streak still stands as the greatest of its kind in the nation, according to the National High School Federation.

The legendary coach whose Newton County teams used to fill giant arenas miles from home, is back in the neighborhood -- in Loganville, to be exact. And the magic touch that has given him more victories than any other high school basketball coach in the state is working once more. In his first season back in public schools after almost 20 years with the Georgia Independent School Association,

The Bradley File

Basketball Records

Years Coaching: 35

Record: 1,079-257 (.807)

State Titles: 3

State Finals: 7

30-Win Seasons: 3

20-Win Seasons (Boys): 21

20-Win Seasons (Girls): 9

Personal Athletic History

High School Career: Graduated Avondale High School, 1953. All-Region basketball four times; All-State twice. All-County basketball and baseball. Offered pro baseball contract, but opted for college scholarship.

College Career: Attended University of Georgia, 1953-57, on basketball-baseball scholarship. Earned three varsity basketball letters, four baseball letters. Played on SEC championship team and runner-up in baseball. Captain and MVP of baseball team senior year.

Bradley has the Loganville Red Devils off to an 11-1 start, their best record in recent memory. So far, they are unbeaten at home.

"**WE'RE REAL** excited about what's happening here," said Bradley, who coached the Rams for 17 seasons, during which his teams won 430 games while losing only 68. "Loganville hasn't had a very good basketball program, but we've already won two tournaments this year."

Bradley left Newton following the 1974-75 season, and spent 12 fruitful seasons at George Walton Academy, where he coached boys and girls, then took two years off to travel the world with his wife of 40 years, Jan. He spent the past five seasons coaching at Trinity Christian School in Dublin, Georgia, before Loganville lured him back into public schools. But, no matter where he works, the winningest active basketball coach in

Georgia, with 1,079 wins (boys and girls) to his credit, will always be synonymous with Newton County and that streak.

"**THAT'S THE THING** most people remember best," Bradley said. "But we were hard to beat anywhere. Through one stretch, 1964 or '65, we won 69 out of 71 games overall."

The streak, or, The Streak, lasted through parts of nine seasons, from 1959 to 1967, or, from Elvis to Jimi Hendrix. When it finally ended, 27 years ago this Thursday, the Rams were virtually worn down. With many of the players sick and injured, Wills High School of Marietta snuck out of town with a 59-41 victory.

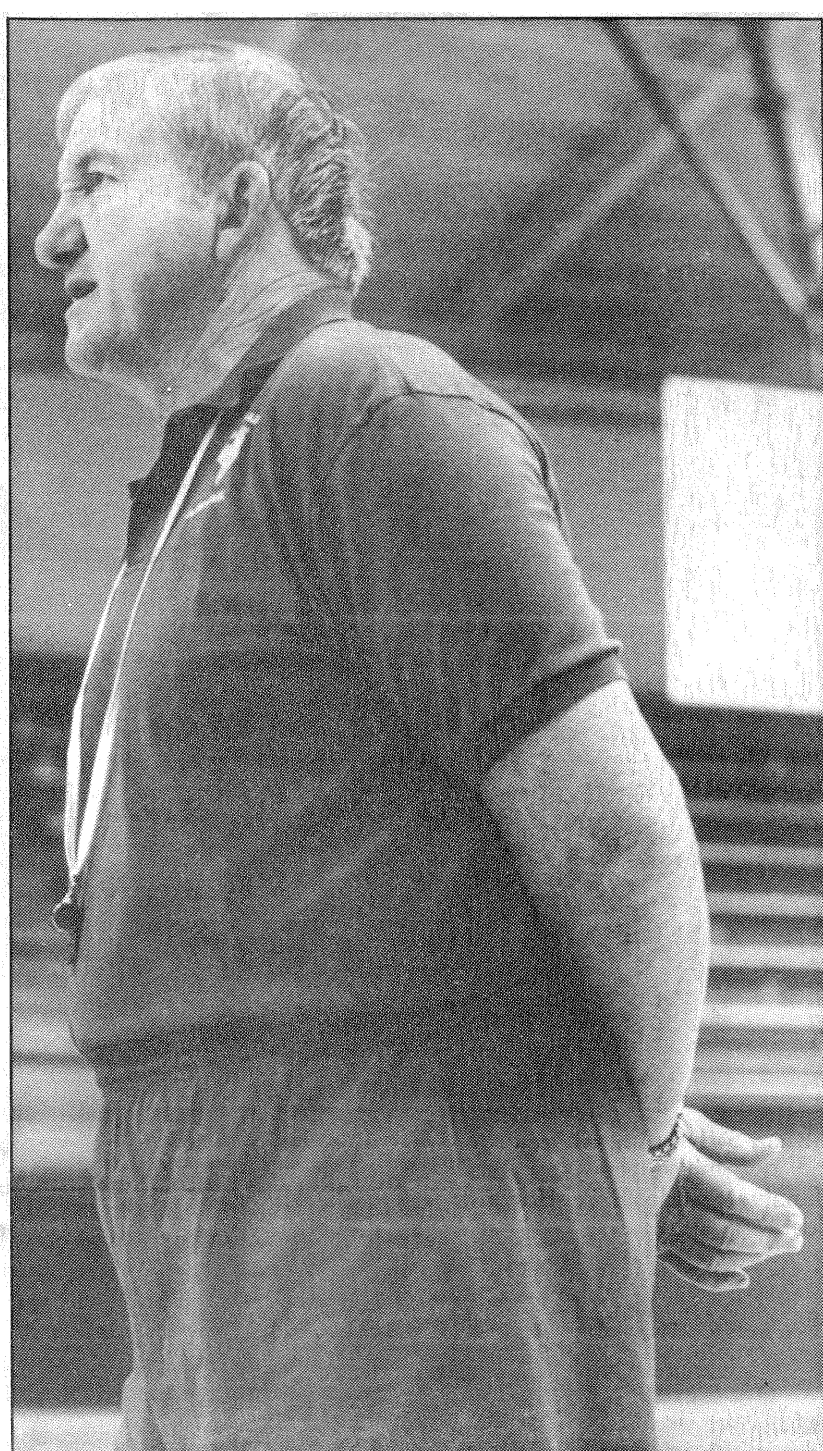
Then Newton proceeded to win its next 51 home games.

"We had some unusual things happen," Bradley said. "There are stories floating around about lights going off and on in the gym -- going off when we were behind, and when they came back on we were ahead. I'm not saying they're all true. The fact is, we didn't have that many close games."

There are players, coaches and fans still living in this area who remember well some of the 'unusual' circumstances that unfolded from time to time at the old Newton County High School gym. In those days, Bradley was a master of the home court advantage.

"**HE KNEW** how to work the crowd, and how to get a crowd to work the referees," said longtime Rockdale County coach Cleveland Stroud, an assistant coach to Mike Nordholz at Rockdale in those days. "When they played in that little bandbox, the place would be packed every game. There wouldn't be any seating arrangements for the visiting team, so usually we stayed in the dressing room before the game started.

"There was no heat at all in



CITIZENphoto by Jerry Grillo

FORMER NEWTON COACH Ron Bradley Inspects His New Troops at Loganville High School

there, but the gym was really hot, so it was like going from one extreme to another. So, we started getting there later, in the middle of the third quarter of the girls game. But that didn't help, because he'd still whip us. He was a great competitor and a master psychologist."

Probably nobody knew this better than the young men who played for Bradley, many of whom still live in the area and speak of the coach in reverential tones. Bob Hunter, a major with the Conyers Police Department, was one of "Bradley's Boys" when the streak began during

the 1959-60 season. Today, Hunter says he was "unfortunately" part of that team. Unfortunately, because the Rams had to lose at home before they could start a winning streak.

"**IT WAS** a game we should have won, and we wasn't too happy about it," said Hunter, who never knew what it was like to lose at home again.

Hunter said one of the things that made Bradley so successful was his ability to develop character and an intense feeling of

See THE LEGEND, Page 8A

The Legend

Continued from Page 6A

ality in his teams.

"Yes, he was in the business of building a basketball team and a training program, but the way he went about it had nothing to do with basketball," said Hunter. "He built character. It sounds corny, but that was his philosophy. Not his coaching philosophy."

Hunter, who is 53, says to this day he has a difficult time referring to Coach and Mrs. Bradley as Ron and Jan.

"They're Coach and Mrs. Bradley," he said.

CHARACTER building aside, the man knew a thing or two about building a basketball team as well. On the court and off, his players were tunnel-visioned, a big, orange round ball perpetually on the horizon. During one 10-year span, all but one of his starters received college scholarships.

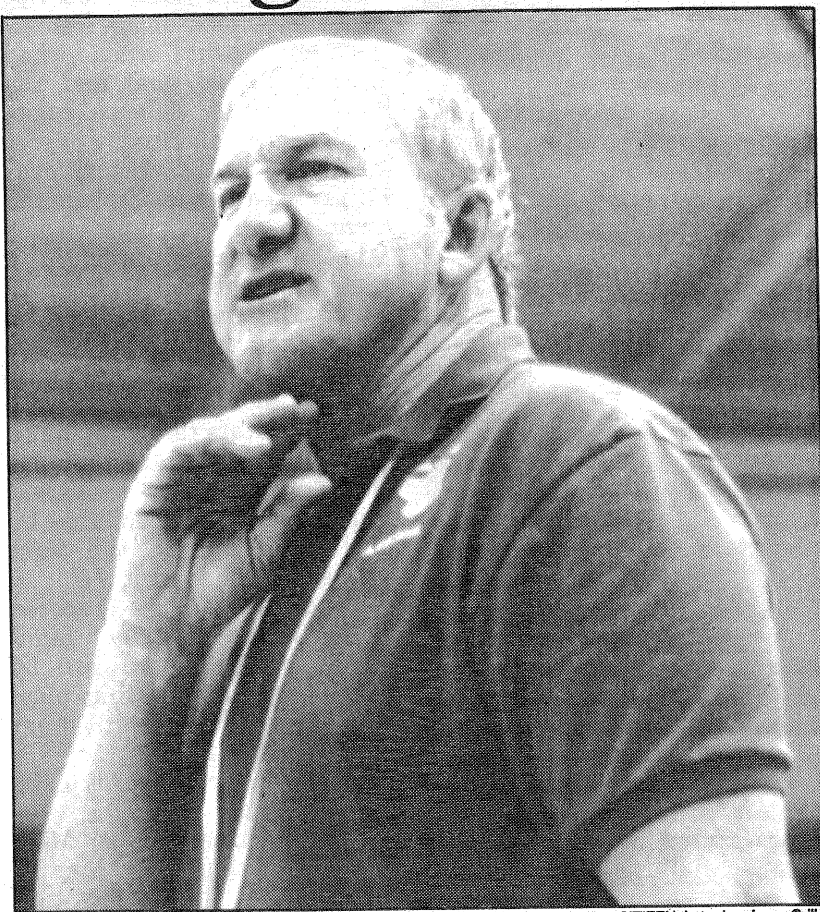
"We were actually scholars of the game," Hunter said. "I'd venture to say that at any given time, he had five players on the court who were equally schooled, better schooled, than the opposing coach."

And the Rams lacked nothing in the way of conditioning, either. It is rumored that Bradley used to turn up the heat in the gym during practice, so his players would be used to it when the heat was turned up as a special feature for visiting teams.

Come game time, the hot little gym -- the same one still in use at Sharp Middle School -- would become more crowded than a sardine can on a subway train at rush hour.

"**THE NOISE** in that gym was unbelievable," said Bradley. "People would spend the night in front of the school to buy tickets the next day. We'd lock the gym a few hours before game time. It got to where we had to put bars on the windows."

No doubt, most of the visiting teams felt like they were behind



CITIZENphoto by Jerry Grillo

RON BRADLEY'S TEAMS Have Won 1,079 Games, And His Loganville Red Devils Are Off To A 11-1 Record

bars. People standing in the aisles, five and six deep around the court. Deafening ovations during the fourth quarter of the girls games as the Rams strutted to the locker room in their blue blazers, to prepare for the victim de jour.

"It could be pretty intimidating for opposing teams," Hunter said. "The only open area in the gym was the playing surface. The fire marshal must have left town on game days."

But, as Bradley pointed out, Newton didn't play all of its games at home. During one three-season stretch, 1963-64 to 1965-66, the Rams had a record of 102-6. Bradley's teams never won fewer than 21 games from 1958 through 1972. They won a state championship (1963-64), finished as the state runner-up on two other occasions, won five straight region titles. And that just scratches the surface at Newton.

IN HIS first year at George Walton, he brought home a state championship -- the first of two with that program.

The man has a habit of winning, period, whether it's boys or girls, basketball, baseball or football -- he's coached them all with amazing success.

His players are his legacy, so many of them having become prominent, productive citizens away from the court -- lawmen, doctors, attorneys, businessmen. Standing tallest among them, perhaps, is Tim Christian, Newton's only all-American, from that 1963-64 state championship team. He went on to an All-SEC football career and is a prosperous businessman who played an integral part in the Atlanta Olympic movement.

In addition, Bradley has taught or coached more than 20 second-generation players. Also,

his three sons all played basketball for him. Two of them are coaches.

"That's what makes this job all the more important to me," Bradley said. "The youngsters you work with are just starting on their path in life. Then years later, you see how they've done, and what wonderful people they've become, and you remember these happy times, and the frustrating times. There's sadness, but it's better than not having any feeling or emotion at all."

"One of the things you learn is, winning isn't everything, and losing is the next best thing to winning."

DURING THAT 9-year run of success at home, which started, ironically enough, with a win over Loganville, winning was the only thing.

Stroud was there the night the streak was broken, and he may have been a little surprised by the reaction of the fierce competitor Bradley after the coveted streak ended.

"I expected Coach Bradley to be real upset," Stroud said. "But he wasn't. He was a gentleman, he went over and shook hands with the opposing coach. I have the utmost respect for him as a coach. That's the thing about old coaches. Most have been successful, because if they're not, they'll get run out. His record speaks for itself."

More than anything else, what illustrates Bradley's stature in high school basketball is the reaction of his fellow coaches when they are asked about him. Typically, this involves a sly smile, a shaking of the head, and the words.

"The living legend," says long-time Henry County coach Chuck Miller, the same man who insists the sheriff story is true. "One of the best anywhere. You won't find many people who know more about basketball than Ron Bradley. Have you heard what he's done up at Loganville?"

There is a sharp sense of irony to Bradley's arrival at Loganville, which brings his career full circle. His first basketball victory, 36 years ago, came at Loganville's expense. The Rams won that game 82-38.