

Bradley transforms 'campus joke' into pride of Loganville

Red Devils in hot pursuit of second winning season since 1957 thanks to state's most successful active coach

By Matt Winkeljohn
STAFF WRITER

It clearly looked like a bad career move, but there was Ron Bradley last winter, 19 years removed from teaching and coaching at a public school, interviewing for just such a job.

In Loganville, 33 miles east of Atlanta, they were asking the state's winningest active basketball coach to take over a program with one winning boys season since 1957, a 12-10 record in 1989-90.

"Coy Baker, who played at Loganville and is on the board, said to me, 'Coach, sometime before I die, I'd like to see a good boys basketball team here,'" says Bradley.

With that comment, the gauntlet was thrown down, and Bradley has since turned sour milk into gold.

The Red Devils are 12-1 going into tonight's Region 8-AA game at No. 10 Franklin County, thanks to Bradley and the all-around play of Robbie Nash and Wes Nash, seniors who're not related, and the inside play of juniors Ti Wilder and Mike Dunn and sophomore Travis Stephens.

"Last year, we were pretty much a joke around campus," said Dunn.

"They'd say, 'Who's going to kick your butt tonight?' or 'How bad are you going to lose?' Now, it's the exact opposite. Now, they say, 'Who're you going to beat, and how bad?' and the gym's packed for home games."

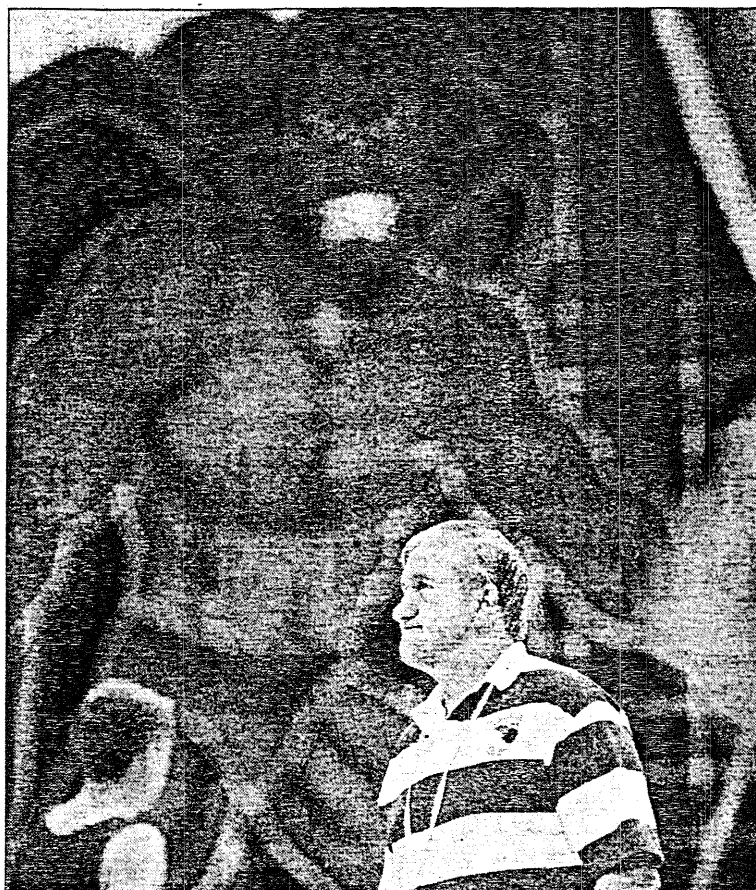
This is nothing new for Bradley, who has a career record of 1,080-257 (combined boys and girls).

When he took over at Newton County in 1958-59, the school had never won a region championship.

His boys teams there went 430-68 in 17 years, including a national high school record 129-game home winning streak from Dec. 11, 1959 to Dec. 29, 1967. They also won nine region championships, a state Class AA title in '63-64, and went 69-1 during one span.

Four state titles to his credit

Many people may have thought Bradley, 60, was out of coaching.



He left Newton County after the '74-75 season when the school was growing and changing rapidly, and the team lost 22 games in three years.

He took a job at George Walton Academy, a small Georgia Independent Scholastic Association (GISA) school in neighboring Walton County.

"We decided we wanted . . . a new challenge," Bradley said, referring, as he often does, to himself and Jan, his wife of 40 years, as a coaching tandem. "We wanted to see if we could coach everything under the sun."

Bradley was at George Walton 12 years, coaching boys and girls basketball, football, and baseball. He then took two years off to travel with Jan, and spent the last five at Trinity Christian, another GISA school, in Dublin.

All told, he has three state basketball titles, and one in football.

So why Loganville?

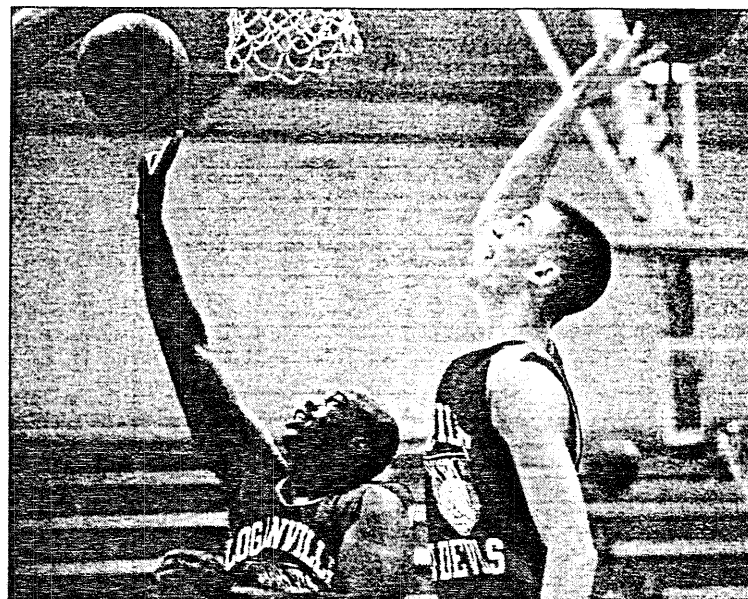
"I liked what Mr. Baker said. I realized there was a challenge here, and an opportunity to do something that hasn't been done," said Bradley, who graduated from Avondale, and played baseball and basketball at Georgia. "It's a situation similar to the one at Newton County. This place has caught fire."

This is Bradley's 100th varsity team, and it doesn't take long to see why he's been so successful.

Upon taking the job, Bradley improved the locker room, and cleaned up the gym before he and athletics director Tommy Stringer had the floor resurfaced.

Organization is another strength.

Bradley's players sit together while attending girls games, wearing red blazers, gray slacks, white shirts, ties, and black dress shoes. When they leave in the third quarter to get dressed, they



Photos by LOUIE FAVORITE/ Staff

Loganville coach Ron Bradley (left) calls his players "eaglets." He says, "Some are going to fly . . . and there will be some disappointments." Above, Dejuan Ramey (left) and Sage McKinnon spread their wings.

often get a standing ovation at home.

He'll also use a little psychological warfare.

Bob Hunter, a policeman in Conyers who played for Bradley during the record winning streak, said he'd often turn up the heat in the gym at Newton during practice. That way, when he turned up the heat during games, at least his players were somewhat used to it.

The visiting locker room, meanwhile, would be frigid.

'Kids need to know someone cares'

Bradley caused the Loganville basketball community to coalesce in a hurry.

Susan Jones, the mother of sophomore Sage McKinnon and one of the chief fund-raisers in the Tipoff Club, helped stage a November shoot-a-thon that raised some \$7,000.

Bradley used that to buy a huge projector and screen to watch game films.

Attitude is a big deal to Bradley.

"One of the great things about my job is I get to work with eaglets," he says. "Some are going to fly, some are going to zoom, and there will be some

disappointments. But you watch some of these kids, and the people they grow into, and it's amazing. Kids need to know someone cares."

That doesn't mean Bradley wins with the soft touch.

"He'll crawl all over a kid," said John Stephens, whose son Travis is a sophomore forward. "But it doesn't bother them other than to get his point across. I've heard them say it doesn't make them mad because they know he knows what he's talking about. This group has got folks stirred up."

Indeed.

If you get the chance to watch tape of the Red Devils on the big screen, and you wonder whose head keeps popping out of the crowd and into the picture, "It's probably Coy Baker," Bradley says.

"I graduated from Loganville in 1952, and I've been on the board for 24 years," says Baker. "It's very exciting to me to be more than halfway through the season and have just one loss. It's blowing not only my mind, but a lot of other people's minds."