

## No 'might have been' with Lanny Martin's baseball coaching career

*Legendary Marion County baseball coach Lanny Martin died last week, and he left behind a legacy that impacted hundreds of lives over the decades.*

MARION — When Lanny Martin took over the Ridgedale baseball program in 2017, it had been more than a decade since it enjoyed a winning season.

Inheriting a young group as green as the grass they played on, the Rockets had junior high level understanding of the game's nuances, were mostly of junior varsity age and were forced to play a varsity schedule in the always tough Northern 10 Athletic Conference.

That team predictably went 2-22 overall and 1-15 in the league.

Undeterred, Martin went to work and turned them into baseball players — and winners.

In 2018, the Rockets were 16-11 and 6-10 in the N10. The following year was even better, going 17-7 overall and posting its first-ever winning N10 mark at 10-6 before going to the Division IV district tournament.

Ridgedale was poised for a special 2020 season as the freshmen who took their lumps in 2017 were now seniors and ready to hand out lumps of their own. Adding to the specialness of the upcoming campaign was the fact that their 70-year-old coach was going to enjoy his final season on a baseball diamond after decades in the sport from youth to college levels.

Alas, it would never come to be. The COVID-19 pandemic hit just as the spring teams were starting practice. At first the Ohio High School Athletic Association postponed the start of the season before pulling the plug altogether, wiping out 2020 from the record books.

With so much of its hitting and pitching returning, Ridgedale had real expectations at challenging for a league championship, and if it could get by state power Newark Catholic in

the district, a potential long tournament run, too.

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In the midst of the shutdown, it got Martin to thinking of a favorite poem by John Greenleaf Whittier.

"The quote is simply this: Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been.' I think that sums it up really well for everybody this season, but especially at Ridgedale High School and the baseball program. It might have been, but we will never know," Martin said in the spring of 2020.

In January of 2022, it wasn't about what might have been with Lanny Martin. It's about what was.

Martin died last week, and it's definitely a loss that is felt by many, including hundreds of former players.

"He was like a second dad to me," said a choked up Ridgedale girls basketball coach Brad Gerfen, who was one of Martin's baseball players from back in the day. "I played a lot of years of baseball with Coach. I'm still teaching my kids the things he taught me. There's just not a better guy. I miss him terribly."

Added Denny McPherson, the longtime Marion Star sports writer, who kept the scorebook for many of Martin's teams going back to 1983: "He was about as good a friend as you could come up with. I know that."

Martin was organized and detail-oriented. That regimen became instilled in his players.

"They would go over and over and over stuff because he wanted the kids to recognize the situation when they were in the game," McPherson said. "He wanted them to recognize it right away and this is what we do. A lot of teams he would play wouldn't have that same capability and that made some differences in games."

No one believed in baking the basics of baseball into a team more than Martin.

"It was his way. He had a plan and a purpose, and you were going to do it that way — and that as the right way. He taught you the fundamentals, and you still had fun doing it," Gerfen said.

Ridgedale Athletic Director Cherie Leach, wasn't the AD when Martin was running the Rockets. She was a mother to standout pitcher Sam Leach, a key player for those Martin baseball teams in the late 2010s.

"He was very much like a father figure to a lot of those boys," she said. "He demanded respect but respected the kids right back. I think that's why they gave him so much respect. I couldn't have asked for a better coach to coach my child."

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And she should know. Leach herself was a longtime standout volleyball coach, so she knows what goes into it.

"Sam I know truly valued everything he learned from him," Leach said. "He's part of the reason why he got to go on and play at the collegiate level (at NCAA Division II West Liberty in West Virginia). His dad coached him as well in travel ball and stuff like that, but Coach Martin instilled so much confidence and faith in our kids. That's why the program continued to rise."

Doug Laucher, who assisted Martin's Prospect American Legion teams and later at Ridgedale, marveled at the connection between players and the head coach.

"The biggest thing I could say about him is yes he coached the game of baseball, but more importantly he coached the game of life," Laucher said. "That was the big thing. He would say to kids the things we're doing on the field and the correct way to handle yourself on the field is the way you should handle yourself in life."

Before that final non-season at Ridgedale, Leach and Martin had a conversation.

"The kids were so well-taught and coached that they started the drills and were doing the coaching in practice," he told her. "I remember him distinctly coming to me and saying, 'Cherie, this is going to be it!' And then COVID got us."

The Rockets were denied a chance at a special season, and Martin was denied one final team to coach and teach.

If he was bitter, he never showed it publicly.

"I've had my day in the sun," he told me in 2020. "I'm sorry for them because they did get robbed, but guess what, the whole world got robbed. It's not just this little locale. We're all in the same boat."

And he wasn't interested in returning for one more year in 2021 if high school sports returned.

"I'm 70 years old. I can't swing a bat anymore because of my back. I can't throw anymore because of my arm and the pain. They don't make enough Advil," he said with a laugh.

"Father Time catches up to us all."

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He seemed content with how his coaching career played out, even with that lost season at the end of it.

For decades he led the various American Legion baseball teams in Marion County. He coached one season of college baseball at Alderson Broaddus in West Virginia. He was a part of the River Valley baseball staff earlier in his career, and he was the head coach at Elgin for a stretch. After Legion baseball in Marion went dormant, he had his final run with the Rockets.

Over the span of 40 years, that's hundreds of lives influenced by Martin.

"He was just so consistent with everything," McPherson said. "He won a ton. He enjoyed that obviously, but what he enjoyed more than anything else was the kids coming up after their career with him and seeing what they'd become and thanking him for it."

Prospect long held an American Legion baseball tournament on the Fourth of July when Martin was managing the team. The player-coach bond was never more evident than during that holiday.

"I think he had tough love," Laucher said. "Deep down there wasn't one thing he wouldn't do for kids. It would go beyond the field of baseball and into the game of life. He would promote them to colleges as well as jobs and would continue to keep contact with those ex-players and their lives."

According to Laucher, Martin treasured seeing what his kids turned into.

"A lot of those young men were back in our area (for the holiday) if they lived out of town and would come to the game just to see Lanny," he said. "That says a lot of what the program he ran meant to those kids. It shaped their lives besides the game of baseball. If that's what we could do as coaches, then we did our job."

One of Martin's baseball kids was Gerfen, and he took those long ago lessons and applied them to his own teams.

"It was that toughness and that real structured routine at practices. That's what I pulled from Coach Martin," he said. "You were going to do it the right way and be fundamentally sound. I respected him like he was a second dad. It's sad."

McPherson said the greatest joy Martin had in coaching wasn't the wins or the championships, it was turning a kid's life around who might have been straying from the

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proper path.

"He was strait-laced on discipline," he said, echoing Laucher's viewpoint on Martin's connection to players. "He'd give you a second chance on something, but you were going to toe the line because it's more than about baseball. When you get away from baseball and all this other stuff, you're going to have to toe the line there, too. You may as well start learning that now, and he incorporated that into his coaching. He's an excellent teacher in that regard, not only in baseball but in life for the kids.

"He really enjoyed that challenge, and for my money, he met every challenge."

Which brings us back to that line from his favorite poem.

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been.'"

Martin may have endured a "might have been" season at the end, but that doesn't define his baseball career or reflect on his essence as a mentor.

Everyone should cherish the impact he made on lives. It wasn't a "might have been" existence. It was — without question — one with true influence over generations.

Lanny Martin was a "definitely," and there's nothing sad on the tongue or the pen about that.

# Never forget the impact of high school heroes on youth

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Published 4:53 a.m. ET Oct. 24, 2022

MARION — When I was in elementary school, these were my favorite basketball players: Larry Bird, Clark Kellogg and Freddie Ross.

Actually, let me amend that. My favorite basketball players on the planet in 1980 and 1981 were Ross, Bird and Kellogg in that order.

Ross was a dynamo of a point guard at Marion Harding. Long before Reggie Miller was draining deep 3-pointers using his signature leg kick to create space, Ross was doing that without a 3-point line. Long before Spud Webb was dunking on TV, Ross was doing it with his generously listed 5-foot-9 frame.

As noted, he was well ahead of his time. In today's slash-and-kick offenses, Ross would have thrived. He could get the rim, and he could find open teammates. He could also lead a fastbreak with the best of them.

Ross was a revelation to a 10-year-old, and he was my guy.

I loved basketball. I played basketball. He was my template. While I was one-100th of the player he was, Ross was who I aspired to be.

The reason he ranks No. 1 with me — and always will — is because he was tangible. Larry Bird was a TV character. Clark Kellogg, while I got to watch him play at Ohio State sitting in St. John Arena a few times, was largely an untouchable, too.

Not Freddie.

I slapped him five. I had a couple awkward small-talk conversations that only a fifth grader and a senior can have. I watched him watch me play during a summer camp he was working

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and soaked in his compliments. For years I worked on the ballhandling drills that he showed us. I tried to emulate everything he did.

Freddie Ross was my boyhood hero, and the cool thing is this: He was real and accessible.

That's my story.

Flash forward to today and it's still the same.

To many elementary schoolers out there, high school athletes are role models. Heck, they are heroes. Same as in my day.

If bowling is my thing and I'm a youngster in 2022, Marion Harding's Jayden Combs is my Freddie Ross. He's a state champion and one of the best to ever roll a ball, not only in this county, but in this state. He's who I aspire to be.

If soccer is my deal, Harding's Taylor Iden, who is the all-time goal scorer in girls soccer history in this county, is one I want to follow.

If I'm a gymnast, Autumn Fitzgerald is a two-time state qualifier for the Presidents. If I'm a golfer, Jacob Beaschler is Harding's record-bearer. If I'm a tennis player, Taryn Simmers is a two-time district qualifier and the reigning Mid Ohio Athletic Conference Player of the Year. If I'm a multi-sport athlete, Alex Stokes is the quarterback in football and will be a varsity basketball player.

And that's just a small sample from Marion Harding. I could have listed many, many more Presidents if space and time allowed.

Now expand it out. Apply that to the other Marion County schools, the schools' in the Marion Star's coverage area, the Central District, the state, the country. It's the same deal.

High school athletes are role models and heroes to the younger eyes watching them. Embrace it and never forget it.

On Saturday evening, Marion Harding is making many of these heroes available and accessible to the community. The Varsity H Club, a Harding institution that dates back generations, will host its first fall festival. There will be fun and games that are appropriate for the season, but there will be one more thing.

This is an opportunity for younger students to meet and mingle with today's star athletes who are running the festival. It's a chance for kids to hang out with their Freddie Ross.

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And that's no small thing.

Forty-two years later, and as someone who went on to meet Larry Bird and have conversations with Clark Kellogg, I'd still be that tongue-tied 10-year-old if I ever ran into Ross again.

The prep athletes might not realize it in the moment, but they are role models, and they are oh so real to those watching them. Never forget that.



# Time to recognize the power of officials

Published 4:10 a.m. ET Sept. 6, 2022

Officials hold the power.

Was the serve in or out? Was it a ball or a strike? Was there contact on the shot or not? Did the sprinter leave the blocks early? Did the defensive back hit the receiver before the ball was touched? Was the soccer forward offsides on the breakaway? Was the wrestler stalling to run out the clock?

Judgments here and judgments there can go a long way toward determining who wins and who loses.

That's power.

But it's not the ultimate power.

Sports can't be played without an arbiter. If there are no referees, there are no games. Simple as that.

Ridgedale found that out last weekend when its football game at Vanlue was moved from Friday night to Saturday due to a scheduling conflict with officials. Also in north central Ohio, Hillsdale and Lucas were forced to move a game to Saturday due to a shortage of officials.

The problem may be simple. Sometimes there are more games than officials to go around. However, the solution to the problem is going to be multi-faceted and much less simple.

It's no secret that many longtime referees — in all sports — are aging out and retiring. The coronavirus pandemic, which has been especially hard on our aging population, accelerated

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the dropout over the last three years. The baby boomers are taking their whistles and going home for good.

Not enough Gen Xers and millennials are taking their place; thus, the deficit of bodies.

The Ohio High School Athletic Association is advocating for a new approach in training officials and addressing at least part of the problem.

OHSAA Executive Director Doug Ute met this summer with members of the Ohio Prep Sportswriters Association and talked about making officiating classes more user-friendly.

"I brought up a point to our group in here. You can take American history online. You can take biology online. You can't take the RefPrep course online?" he asked rhetorically.

The OHSAA is partnering with RefReps.com and moving the available training there. The association is also advocating for school districts to add the online sports officiating classes to their curriculum to earn physical education credits if needed.

"We are doing what we can," Ute said. "(We are) partnering with close to 70 high schools to work on a work force development credit for those kids because it's employability right out of the gate."

Last week, the OHSAA issued a press release announcing its new initiative.

"RefPrep is a good online tool to learn the basics of officiating, and it's available anytime, so in addition to being available to use within schools, it's also available for adults who otherwise couldn't get to an in-person class," Ute said in the release.

In July, Ute said he saw an advertisement in a newspaper for a volleyball officiating class that was being offered on Tuesday nights.

"I thought to myself, what if I work on Tuesday nights or I have babysitting issues on Tuesday nights? That means I can't do volleyball unless I can do it from RefPrep," he said.

The OHSAA plans to work with Ohio's colleges and universities to offer officiating classes as some have done for decades.

By reaching high school-age teens and college students, the hope is that officiating's lack of depth can be replenished much quicker.

"This is work force development and instant employability," Ute said. "A licenced official can begin working games and earning money almost right away, and there are many other

benefits of being an official, such as staying involved in sports, staying physically active and being part of a team."

As mentioned before, the problem is simple to see, but the solution is more elusive.

In the age of social media, too many ugly confrontations between officials, fans, coaches and players are going viral. It's not a pleasing way to attract desperately needed new talent.

"I don't know if it's just Youtube or whatever, but you can see that stuff more, the disrespect and physical contact that some of them get involved in is not good," Ute said in July. "When you start out officiating, you start out in pee wee stuff a lot of times, and there's no administrator around to walk over to tell somebody to calm down a little bit. It's not Ohio. It's the country. Everybody you talk to is having issues with that."

So the working conditions can get hostile and that's a potential turnoff for a wide swath of folks who might otherwise consider taking it up.

But it's more than that, and that's why it's a complicated fix.

Reffing youth leagues, junior high matches and high school games is not meant to be a career. It's a supplement, a hobby, community service.

While no one expects to get rich officiating grassroots sports, there is an expectation for compensation. In some parts of the state and with some sports, the pay has not kept up with the times.

Earlier this summer, high school football officials in northeast Ohio threatened to boycott Week 1 games due to pay discrepancies.

According to a Fox8.com article on the issue, football referee Anthony Bondra said he made between \$40 and \$45 a game when he started 38 years ago. Today the average pay for a high school football game in Ohio is \$72, so compensation has lagged behind inflation, especially this year when gas prices surged.

Also in the story, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates high school football officials make between \$94 and \$100 a game across the nation. Some states are paying up to \$120 per game, while western Pennsylvania officials can earn \$200, according to Fox8.com.

The OHSAA has no control over what leagues and schools pay during the regular season, but it does set tournament and playoff rates. The organization acted as an intermediary between the officials associations and the conferences and schools, Ute said.

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"You don't want one school paying \$100 and the school down the road in the same league paying \$75," Ute said. "What we're trying to propose to our officials and to our schools is whatever we set our first-round tournament game (rate) at, to do a percentage of that."

A deal was eventually struck and there was no boycott of Week 1 games. The Elyria Chronicle-Telegram reported that a five-year rollout of pay structure was agreed to. Pay increased to \$80 a game this season with gains eventually coming to \$100 a contest.

That's good for officials, but it's a strain on already stressed athletic budgets.

"One central Ohio school told me last spring that if increased by \$5 on every official they paid during the year at middle school and high school, it increases their athletic budget by \$14,000," Ute said.

So \$5 here and \$10 there adds up quickly and someone has to pay for it.

"The only way to combat that is to go out (and increase ticket prices). Instead of \$6, it's \$7, or \$7 and it's \$8, which isn't good to do," Ute said. "I wish everybody could get in free, but that's not the way it works."

So dramatically increasing pay to attract and retain officials has limits, which is why a simple problem doesn't have a simple solution.

"I understand the athletic budgets when you talk about adding \$14,000 just on a \$5 increase on every sport. That's a lot," Ute said. "If I'm that official that started doing games 17 or 18 years ago and I'm making the same amount of money, I get every piece of that. I get both sides and understand both sides. They need an increase on this side, but what is it going to do to the budget? It's tough."

It is tough, but it's a problem that is at least getting addressed.

Officials hold the ultimate power and it's time to recognize that fact and treat them appropriately.

Tom Wilson

Division II  
Column

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Published  
July 24<sup>th</sup>

# Mental health is no joke: My story of growing up in chaos and coming out on the other side

It seems everywhere I look and everything I hear, the concerns about mental health and the toll it is taking on our country, especially our youth, are overwhelming.

Life is not easy, and everyone has issues, some more than others. I'm one of those people. Growing up in circumstances that were out of my control, certainly affected my mental well-being and shaped who I was — and who I would become.

On the outside, I'm sure my life looks wonderful — and it is, but it wasn't always that way. Not by a long shot. I almost feel guilty because I was one of the lucky ones to escape the utter chaos that I grew up in. The odds were against me, but somehow, I was able to preserve and come out on the other side.

To be honest, going through the things I went through growing up, either makes you stronger, or things can turn for the worse because a person can only take so much before they feel helpless. At the point, that's when it would have been easy for me start to make the wrong choices.

I've had to fight those feelings, even as an adult. As a child and even when I was a teenager, it was hard growing up without structure in my life. By the grace of God, I never turned to drugs and alcohol and was able to stay out of trouble, although there were plenty of temptations.

Throughout my adult life, there are times when I have felt lonely. There were times when I just wanted to get in my car, start driving, and never look back. I've always felt like I was running from my past. My mental well-being seems like it was always being put to the test, and it was a matter of time before I would explode or do something I regretted.

At times, it seemed like I was right on the edge, but something — I'm not sure what — always kept me from making the leap. I feel very fortunate in retrospect, but I know other people aren't as lucky.

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I empathize with those with mental health issues and understand its importance. We need to do more, which is why I am choosing to speak out. Exposing myself and telling my story is not easy and brings back memories I would much rather forget.

Hopefully, my story will help someone else. Even if it only hits home with one person, I will feel like I did something meaningful.

### **Life as I knew it changed when I was a teenager**

My 15-year-old self could not comprehend what was happening to me at the time. Why was I here? What did I do to deserve being in the Fayette County Children's Home?

That was a long time ago (1979), but when something like that happens to you, it stays with you.

Forever.

As the children's service workers drove me down the long, tree-lined lane, I had no idea how much my life was about to change. As the van drove slowly up the lane, before I knew it, three scary-looking brick buildings appeared. The main building was in the middle, and as I soon would find out, the building on the left was on the boys' side and the girls' building was on the right side.

After going over the rules and what was expected, I was escorted to the boys' dorm. Downstairs was the kitchen area, and upstairs is where I would sleep. It was a big room with a bunch of cots — it seemed like 30 or so of them — but only about five boys were there at the time.

Once the case workers left, an older woman appeared, who was gruff, to say the least, and immediately, she let me know what my chores would be and what time breakfast and dinner would be served. She told me if I was a minute late, she would throw my plate of food out and I would not get to eat.

That first night was the worst. I cried myself to sleep, and there would be plenty more nights like that. It was awful. I felt all alone and helpless. there is not a worse feeling than that.

I didn't realize it then, but my mental well-being was being put to the test. The emotional impact it had on me would affect me for the rest of my life, just like it has for thousands, if not millions of other kids.

**Back to where it all began**

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My first memories as a child were around 3 or 4. It seemed like we had a wonderful family. I had a mom and dad, an older brother and sister, and a younger sister. We were all close in age.

My parents would eventually divorce a few years later, and from there, even though I didn't know it at the time, my life was about to forge a path of constant change and chaos.

Both of my parents were alcoholics. They were selfish and put themselves first before their kids.

Once my dad moved out of the house, things went from bad to worse.

I attended New Holland Elementary in the first grade, and what would follow shouldn't happen to any child. By the time I graduated, I would attend eight more different schools, and I can remember them all, and some of them, I wasn't there very long.

Following the first grade, I would attend five more different elementary schools before reaching junior high. I attended Washington Court House Middle school for grades 6-8. I finally felt a little sense of belonging.

I moved on to Washington High School for my freshman year. I played football, basketball and baseball that year, and everything seemed to be going well. But it wasn't. My home life was in shambles. We were poor and sometimes we didn't have a lot of food to eat. I saw how nice other kids dressed and how supportive their parents were. I had no structure in my life. I had no support system.

That was my life, I didn't know anything different. Looking back, I felt lost and was envious of what other kids in the neighborhood seemed to have. We lived in an apartment that was in an alley. I wore dirty clothes to school, and when you are in junior high, that was not a good feeling.

I guess I never had a sense of belonging, and it was something I longed for every day. It makes me sad just thinking about it. I felt vulnerable and lacked confidence.

When I was 13, I found out who I thought was my dad, wasn't really my biological dad, and to this day, I still don't know who my real dad is. It was awful when and how I found out, which just made me feel even more lonely.

As a sophomore, I had just completed playing my football season, when the children's service came to our house to inform my mother, that they were

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taking me and my sister away from her. Someone had turned her in for being an unfit mother. And just like that, were being taken to the Children's Home.

My sister wasn't there very long. A foster family took her in. I would remain in the Children's Home until the day I graduated high school on May 29, 1981. By that time, there were so few kids, we all moved into the main building.

The only thing that kept me going during my time was they let me continue to play sports. I thank God every day for that because it gave me a sense of belonging and discipline, and just being on a team and having coaches that seemed to care, was huge for me.

When I walked out of the Children's Home for the final time at 18 years old, I had no idea what I was going to do or where I was even going to live. I moved in with my mom and had a string of low-paying jobs. I didn't even have a car, let alone a driver's license.

I eventually moved to Mount Vernon with a family friend in early 1982. I was married at 20 years old and divorced at 25. I had no clue what marriage meant. I got married again at the age of 30, and once again, was too immature to understand what true love was.

I never felt love growing up. Looking back, I think all I was looking for was a family to call my own. When you grow up that way, you feel like an outsider. You feel like people judge you differently, so I get how mental health and well-being are so prevalent in our society today.

Attempting to overcome all those challenges has not been easy for me, so I feel for others who have been in the same circumstances, and for those who have had it worse than me. It's hard for people to comprehend what it's really like.

### **Finding my way**

It seemed like I was always searching for something or someone to give me a chance. After working several jobs in my 20s, I eventually worked in the mail room at the Mount Vernon News. I dreamed of being a sportswriter or a coach, but it seemed like a pipe dream.

My life just seemed to be stuck in neutral when someone gave me an opportunity. Mount Vernon News Sports Editor Joe Wasiluk was that person. He changed my life forever and I will forever be indebted to him.

He asked if I wanted to be a stringer and cover high school games, and of course, I said yes, even though I had never covered a game, let alone write on a computer. I remember it like it was yesterday. The first story I ever wrote was



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about a football game between Danville and Loudonville. When I came back from the game, I lacked so much confidence that I wrote the game on a piece of paper instead of the computer. I was so nervous, but Joe was patient and kind and would teach me so much about sports writing.

Little did I know that it was the beginning of a 30-year career. It merely took someone believing in me and offering me a chance. Had Joe not done that, who knows how my life would have turned out.

I do know that I don't take anything for granted and I am so grateful for the things in my life.

I often think back to that 15-year-old kid in the Children's Home and feeling like no one cared and not having a lot of hope. I was scared. Scared of what life was going to throw my way and wondering how things would turn out for me.

As I've gotten older, I always try to treat people the way I would want to be treated and never be judgmental. I see that in people every day. Maybe if people were a lot more kind, our world would be a better place, because regardless of how you perceive someone, they always have a story.

For those of you going through difficult times and feeling like no one cares, I know it's not easy, but I challenge you to keep fighting and continue to keep pushing through even when the odds are stacked against you.

The same goes for teachers, coaches, and even bosses because you never know when you can make a difference in someone's life. Just being more attentive to people's needs can go a long way.

If you feel like you need help, or just need someone to talk to, don't ever be afraid or feel ashamed to reach out and seek help. Regardless if you feel helpless, lonely, or depressed there is always hope.

I lived through turmoil and chaos and somehow came out on the other side, thanks to someone else's kindness.

Years after I left the Children's Home, I saw where they tore all three of those buildings down, and for me, it will always be a reminder of where I came from, but I didn't let it define me.

I kept pushing forward, hoping one day something positive would happen in my life, and it eventually did. I never take it for granted. Ever.

Every morning when I wake up and step my feet on the ground, I thank God for giving me another day.

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Published  
Dec. 4th

# Meeting at mid-field before each game meant more than you will ever know, coach McKinney

It's not how they wanted to finish, but what an unforgettable year it was for the Bloom-Carroll football.

The Bulldogs fell short in their quest to bring home a state title when they lost 35-14 against Canfield in Friday's Division III state championship game to finish as state runner-up. It was the first time in school history that Bloom-Carroll had made it to the state finals.

The Bulldogs made memories that will last a lifetime and they certainly galvanized their community. The support the fans showed throughout the playoffs was undeniable and there were plenty of them in attendance at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium showing their support.

What the team accomplished this season will live on forever.

On a personal note, I want to say thank you to Bloom-Carroll head coach Jeremy McKinney, his coaching staff and the players. Covering them this season will always be one of my fondest memories as a sportswriter.

I've covered a ton of teams throughout my 30-year career, but rarely do you get to know the players and coaches on a personal level. This coaching staff and team were different.

I'll start with coach McKinney. To be honest, at least for me, I kind of know when I'm either going to click with a coach or I'm not. I've been at this long enough to know that most coach-reporter relationships are that. Usually, it's just all business. You cover a game, you interview the coach, and you leave, which is fine. That's just how it is.

However, on rare occasions, you get that coach that you just click with, and it becomes more than just a coach-writer relationship. It becomes a little more personal, and that's the way it became this year with coach McKinney.

Heading into this season, I knew who coach McKinney was because he had spearheaded an outstanding defense the previous two seasons as Bloom-

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Carroll's defensive coordinator when the Bulldogs had reached the Division IV state semifinals, but oddly enough, I had never talked to him.

So, this summer as workouts and two-a-days began, I had my first-ever interaction with McKinney. To be honest, I didn't know what to expect. Little did I know then, he would become one of my all-time favorite coaches to cover.

First impressions of someone are usually what sticks with you, good or bad, and the one thing I went away with that day was just genuine the guy is. We talked like we had known each other forever, and it just grew from there as the season went along.

I covered the Bulldogs at Circleville during the fourth week of the season, and I hadn't really talked to McKinney since our first interaction before the season started, so during warmups, I made my way out to talk to him on the field. From that game on, every time I covered the Bulldogs, and throughout the playoffs, I made a point to go talk to coach McKinney before every game.

It became a ritual, me making my way to midfield to talk with coach McKinney before every game. I did it on Friday, too, before the state championship game. Sometimes we would talk about football and sometimes we would talk about stuff that did not pertain to football.

It was something I looked forward to. Last Monday when I went to practice doing my interviews with coach McKinney and the players for previews for the state title game, we ended up talking for 45 minutes right outside the weight room, and to be honest, we probably could have talked even longer. It was dark and spitting rain, but there we were, talking, and time just flew by.

The point is, it's rare to build a relationship like that with a coach you are covering. It says everything about what kind of person coach McKinney is and what he stands for. I guess this is my way of thanking you, coach McKinney. Thank you for listening to me and always being so forthcoming about everything.

It's sad the season is over, but what a season it was. I will miss covering the Bulldogs but won't soon forget what a special season it was, thanks to the interaction I had with the players and coaches.

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Coach McKinney is a credit to what high school coaching is all about. He is in it for all the right reasons. Bloom-Carroll should be thankful it has a coach with as much integrity as coach McKinney has.

I am humbled and grateful that to know you, and coach, thank you once again for being so kind and personable to me. Each time I made the walk toward coach McKinney at midfield, I often wondered what he was thinking as I was walking toward him, but he was always gracious and welcoming even though he had a game to coach. Now that the season is over, I will miss our talks at midfield before every game. It meant more to me than you will ever know.

Until next season, coach, when we meet on the field before each game.

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Published  
MAY 11<sup>th</sup>

# Having a winning culture is all about actions and Lancaster baseball has it

Many coaches and teams think they have a winning culture.

When you get right down to it, most teams don't. They think they do, and they talk about it a lot. But when push comes to shove, if you have to talk about it, you probably don't have it.

Winning culture is all about actions and not just when things are going well. A winning culture takes over when you face adversity.

If winning were easy, everyone would win all the time. So, what sets a winning program apart from others? It's players believing in the system and being 100 percent committed to the program. It's body language. It's being engaged all the time and not just some of the time.

The Lancaster baseball team, led by head coach Corey Conn, now in his 10th season, clinched its fourth consecutive Ohio Capital Conference championship. It marks the first time in program history it has won four straight league or conference titles.

I don't think people realize how hard it is to win one championship, let alone four consecutive titles. The Golden Gales have accomplished that feat because of the culture Conn has instilled in the program.

Again, teams want it and think they might have it. With the Gales, though, you can feel it. You feel it in the dugout, regardless of if they are winning or losing. Every player is fully engaged from the first pitch to the last.

The Gales expect to win and do everything in their power to win, thanks to Conn, who demands it.

"We have a dugout full of guys that love each other," Lancaster junior Isaac Cooperrider said. "At the start of the year we had some struggles hitting the ball, but we had a meeting and coach showed us a cool graphic. There were a bunch of arrows in a box and some of them weren't pointing in the same direction and then he showed us some that were all pointing in the same direction."

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"It was a good metaphor for how you have to have dugout full of guys pointing in the same direction and who are always going to pull for each other and fight for each other," he added. "We are at a point in the program where we are expected to win championships every year, and it's a good feeling."

I get to see other teams while covering so many games, and it has amazed me the difference in the attitudes and body language compared to Lancaster. It's night and day. I've seen teams basically give up as soon as they get behind in a game, which goes back to having a winning culture.

Teams think they have it, but they don't.

"(Culture) is a buzzword that a lot of people try to use, but I think if you come and watch us you can kind of feel it from us," Conn said. "It's that 'it factor' that is kind of hard to define, but it's our actions. We talk all the time about it's one pitch 100 times. You may lose and they may get a base hit, but it's the next pitch. It's the next pitch, and we feel like if we can consistently win each pitch in the game, we can consistently be engaged in each pitch in the game — and we fight for each other in every pitch of the game — that's kind of our culture wrapped up in a word, so to speak."

A year ago, the Gales didn't return a player with varsity experience. Nary a player had a varsity at-bat, but the Gales still won more than 20 games, including a conference title and their third consecutive district championship.

Earlier this season, second baseman Kyle Garber, reigning OCC-Buckeye Division Player of the Year, was lost for the year because of a knee injury. Losing a player like Garber was tough, but overcoming that kind of adversity is when Conn seems to be at his best in maximizing his players' production.

Lancaster is 18-3 and ranked No. 10 in Division I by the Ohio High School Baseball Coaches Association. On Sunday, it earned the No. 3 seed in the Central District tournament.

It wasn't that long ago when the Gales were lucky to get a top 25 seed.

"Winning is not easy, and I have to give a lot of credit to our last few senior classes for setting the tone in the offseason," Conn said. "It goes back to our offseason workouts, our 40-for-40, going through all the preseason practices and all of classroom sessions. We faced a lot of adversity this year, and it goes back to some of our training where we kind of expect bad things to happen, and when it does, you aren't shocked or surprised by it. I'm extremely proud of these seniors, and this team for handling the adversity we faced this year."

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After each win, the Gales head to left field and wait for Conn to come and jump into their arms. They jump up and down and celebrate. Some people may think that's silly, especially when they beat a lower-caliber team.

It's funny because I now see a lot of other teams doing the same thing after they win. You can't fake a winning culture. Lancaster has it through and through.

Winning should never be taken for granted. The Gales cherish and celebrate every victory. If anyone has a problem with that, well, they don't understand what exactly a winning culture looks like.

Thanks to Conn, the Lancaster baseball program has a vision and purpose every time they step on the field. And they never waver from it.

That is what having a winning culture is all about.

# Gray's humor, intensity led to results

Mark Hazelwood • Division II Column

No matter the subject, the conversation always contained a lesson.

Steve Gray never quit coaching. Reflecting on the tenure of the boys' basketball coach for the last 21 years at Norwalk, that's what stands out most.

Gray announced his retirement from coaching on March 22 — eight years to the day the Truckers won the Division II state championship in 2014.

Of course, to say he never quit coaching isn't meant just as a basketball statement. Over the years, I sometimes found myself on the receiving end of Gray's well-known banter. And as I look back, a lesson was included.

In January 2012, headed to a Truckers' home game against Port Clinton, I was caught in a pop-up snowstorm coming back from Sandusky. I walked into the gym right at the opening tip.

After quickly taking my seat at the scorer's table, Gray barked my name so loudly, away from the action on the floor, that even one of the officials — and of course everyone sitting at the table — stopped and looked over.

He simply pointed at his wrist to an imaginary watch. I was late — and had been caught.

Be on time.

Or last season, during a brief stoppage in play in a home game against Perkins, sitting about five feet behind the Norwalk bench, I was reading something on my phone. I looked up just in time to see a half-full bottle of water thrown my way.

Fortunately, I caught the toss. As Gray likes to point out, at least he had the decency to tighten the cap first. But the coach glanced my way, caught me not watching the game.

Always pay attention. Oftentimes I'm asked why I sit on the bleachers at NHS home games. Even with room at the scorer's table, I take my seat a row or two behind the home bench.

And every game, Gray would walk over just before the game started to tell me something related to the game. And yes, usually sarcasm was involved.

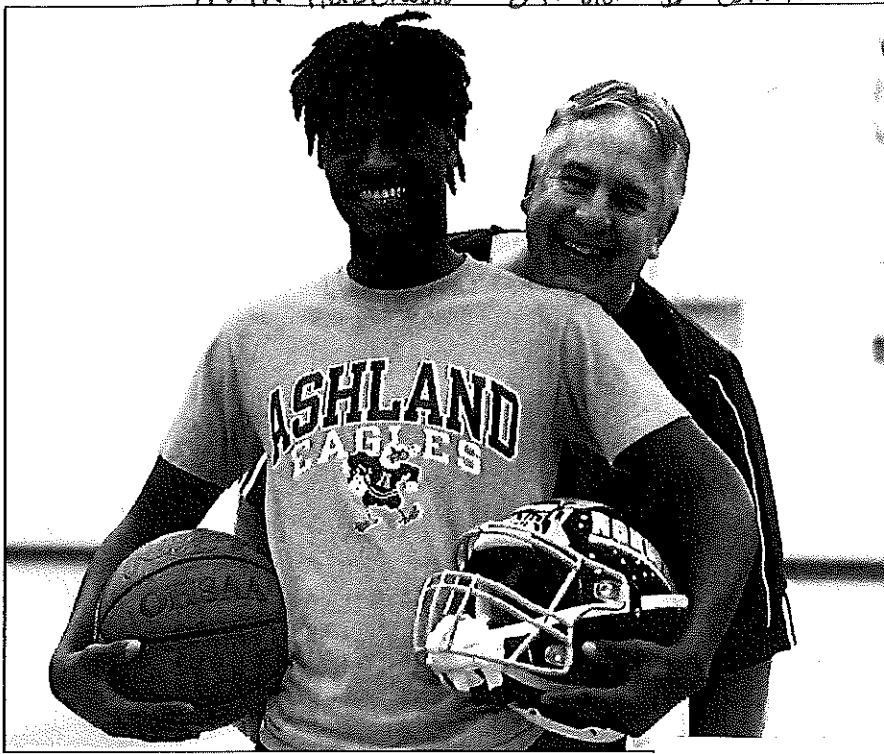
Sometimes, his chat would be a random observation about an opponent from a game I had recently staffed. But usually and, humorous or not, he included a tip of information. Even said in humor, it went back to always being prepared.

## Stand-up comedy

Over the years, Gray's humor during games is what eventually made him personable for many fans.

When the Truckers first took off as a team during the amazing four-year run from 2011-14, Gray often did post-game radio interviews with former WLKR sports director Scott Truxell. Waiting my turn nearby for an interview, Gray always made sure to offer a parting shot on the airwaves.

"I have to go talk to Mr. Hazelwood ... I don't know why, he never writes what I say, anyway."



With Steve Gray nearby, as shown here in a Nov. 19, 2018 photo with standout Brandon Haraway, things were often never too serious. Gray retired on March 22 after 21 seasons as the Norwalk High School boys basketball coach. The Truckers won 312 games, including six league titles and a state championship in that span.

With that, he'd walk over, leaving to Truxell the task of explaining to radio listeners that the remark was a joke — and me shaking my head.

On a recent trip to Clyde, assistant coach Nick Lee didn't have a pen. Gray simply took mine from my hand and handed the pen to Lee, quipping, "he doesn't need it, he doesn't write anything down right."

Gray's wife, Sue, once arrived late to a game in Huron, a week before Christmas. Her husband was well aware she'd been shopping.

As play continued, he asked her how much money she'd spent, since she arrived so late. Sue shoed him away back to the action on the floor. The game stopped and he came right back. "No really, how much did you spend?"

Another one of his favorites was to reveal in conversation on nights where my deadline was pushing it.

This past season at a Norwalk girls' game, a Perkins player had been fouled, down a point, with no time on the clock. Sitting nearby, Gray calmly predicted the player would make the first shot, but miss the second, thus forcing overtime — and creating a headache for deadline writing.

When that exact scenario played out, Gray simply smiled, stood up and walked away.

And of course, he took great delight in the famous six-overtime district semifinal boys' game between Margaretta and Huron played at NHS in 2018.

Worth noting is that at the end

of the fourth overtime, Sue didn't believe him when he called to explain why he was going to be much later returning home. I had to verify over the phone that it was indeed the case.

During the 2018 football season, my co-worker, Erin Caldwell, arrived at NHS to take a photo of Brandon Haraway. The photo was intended to be a dual football-basketball illustration.

When I asked her about the shoot, Erin said it had gone well — although Brandon had been "photo-bombed" in the background by his basketball coach throughout the process.

The humor was always an interesting contrast to Gray's coaching style, however.

When floor action got intense, so did Gray. He was loud, he got in the face of his players, and he'd let the best of the seven 1,000-point scorers he coached — among others — really have it, loud and clear.

More than a few times his intensity was taken the wrong way, leading to some acrimony, public outcry and battles. But what also stood out during those times was that Gray never changed. He always kept coaching the same way, through every up or down moment. And that's not as common as one might think in those situations.

## More than laughs

All joking aside though, a handful of other stories are worth sharing.

The coaching style that was often hard on players? I cannot count how many times Gray called me on his drive home from NHS — after we had just spoken 30-plus minutes earlier.

And the conversation would usually go like this: "I was really

hard on him, please say this about him — I forgot to say something earlier."

When Jacob McKenzie suffered a serious neck injury in the summer of 2008, great concern and support were shown by many. After McKenzie had neck surgery, just one Norwalk coach was on hand to be with him: Steve Gray.

During my episode of serious stomach surgery nearly three years ago, Gray was the first from NHS to reach out. Of course, he also needed me and said there were better options if I really needed a week off.

Junior basketball player Braedyn Demuth finished his last cancer treatment in Akron in December. Gray was all-in on recognizing Braedyn's special moment in public. Gray called me twice beforehand, making sure the event was covered on my end.

When the Truckers hosted unbeaten and state-ranked Western Reserve on Feb. 12, it was by far the biggest crowd of the season — with a lot of leftover trash in the bleachers on both sides. Long after I left the gym, both Steve and Sue were helping the NHS maintenance staff clean up the trash. While I would love to tell you that's the common, decent thing to do in that situation — the truth is, it's not.

After that evening, I sensed Gray's retirement announcement might be coming. I said nothing about it, but from that point forward, I made sure I didn't miss another NHS game.

The easy decision on March 4 would be to stay here in Norwalk and watch two successful area teams, Western Reserve and Willard, play in a district semifinal.

Instead, I shifted some arrangements so I could be in

Ashland for the Truckers' district semifinal game vs. Huron — just in case that was the end for Steve Gray. After the loss and season's end, Gray said he planned to attend the state championships (March 18-20) in Dayton and consider his future after a relaxing weekend with friends. When his name came up on my phone the morning after the championships on March 21, I instinctively knew.

It was the end of an era.

In closing, just one "favorite story" about Steve Gray is too hard to name. However, one from that magical March 2014 run is at the top.

In the foyer at Norwalk High, Gray stood to my left as we watched the state send-off with the faculty and student body. As his players walked past us behind the marching band in the hallways, Gray turned to me and asked, "Can I tell you something?"

Well-trained at that point to expect a sarcastic comment, I played along and said yes. He leaned over, away from the noise, and stated, "we're going to win tomorrow."

Taken aback, I said, "yeah?" — to which Gray doubled down, nodding, "I'll be shocked if we don't win."

With that, he walked away toward his team. I stood there stunned for a moment, digesting his version of a private Joe Namath guarantee. That night, all the way to Columbus, I speculated about what he knew or had picked up on.

The prediction was very out of character for Gray — especially since this was the biggest game to that point in both Norwalk history and his coaching career.

As we know, the Truckers surged past Dayton Thurgood Marshall midway through the second half in a 72-64 win in the state semifinals. Two days later, NHS led from start to finish in a 65-58 win over defending champion Columbus Bishop Watterson to claim the state title.

What sparked his startling prediction? In the years since, he has said he knew Marshall would full-court press the Truckers — and he had two All-Ohio players who he knew would easily break it.

To me, it was more than that. He was a coach who, at the start of that season, was uncomfortable giving up full control of the offense to his players — to let a talented team play freely.

Instead, by making the hardest decision of his coaching career, Gray got comfortable enough to believe his Norwalk kids were capable of beating teams from Lima, Dayton and Columbus. In backing off somewhat, he and his coaching staff had instilled a level of confidence and belief that led the Truckers to either tie or lead in all but six of the 64 minutes at state.

That same confidence was also why Norwalk returned to the regional tournament, won four straight sectional titles, and advanced to three consecutive district title games for the first time in program history between 2015 and 2022.

The end result was also one of the greatest coaching tenures in the history of Norwalk athletics.

All because Steve Gray never stopped coaching.



# Eagles displayed emotion in run to title match

FAIRBORN

Even the words stung. Monroeville senior standout Maddie Daniel closed her eyes and took in deep breaths as each word hung in the air.

The All-Ohio first team selection listened to her head coach, Kendra Snook, discuss what went wrong in the interview room following Saturday's Division IV state championship loss vs. New Bremen at Wright State University's Ervin J. Nutter arena.

Just 15 minutes earlier, Daniel had looked to the scoreboard and saw her team down 24-17 in the third set — one point from the eventual three-set loss to the No. 1-ranked Cardinals.

After the Eagles scored, Daniel turned to teammates and was imploring them to stay in the fight. Trying to will the season to continue for just one more point.

Behind this scene was what appeared to be half the population of Monroeville. The crowd was also trying to do its part — keeping the fuse lit a few moments longer.

The Eagles were able score four straight points and at least make the Cardinals think about it before dropping the set, 25-21.

But what struck me about the way the championship loss played out was the investment that was displayed.

I've seen close to a dozen or so championship games involving area teams in person. A common, if not overused, phrase in sports is for players and coaches to "wear your heart on your sleeve."

Cliché or not, I saw that on Saturday. Maybe a little more than championship events in the past.

But really, if you looked close enough, it was visible all season.

Much was made about Monroeville's inability to win once it got to Dayton. Some of that was running into New Bremen twice in the semifinals. The Eagles had lost three times in five sets — including twice to the Cardinals and Jackson Center — and last season in four to St. Henry.

It wasn't as if they made the trip to Wright State and

were overwhelmed. But because of that stigma, there was an openness from the seniors and their head coach about the 0-4 record in the five days leading up to Monroeville's semifinal match vs. Newark Catholic.

Then, on Thursday, the first signs of that candor were strongly shown.

As the final point hit the floor off a swing by Daniel, Snook was able to turn around and hug one of her assistant coaches. It was a longer embrace than usual.

Bill Orwig is Snook's father. He has been there, quite literally, every step of the way. From junior high and high school at Margaretta, to even when Snook played

collegiately at Heidelberg University in Tiffin — Bill Orwig was there as her coach.

"It was fitting that I drug him along when I got this job 14 years ago," she said. "He does so much behind the scenes stuff. And as a young coach, there is so much stuff you don't know — so I've been really grateful to have him help us."

For every first within the Monroeville program — district and regional championship victories in 2013 and 2016 — Snook's father was right there on the bench.

I was also there when Snook and the Eagles rallied from 2-0 down to win in five sets over arch rival St. Paul for their first-ever district title in 2013. I've had several conversations over the years with Bill about his days coaching Kendra — and how he sees her as a coach today.

There is no mistaking the father-daughter duo have helped forge a winning culture in their program, as evidenced by often ending up in the same spot no matter the talent that cycles through.

But when I saw that hug on Thursday, anyone who has been a parent — or been involved or had children active in extra-curricular activities — understood it was more than just celebrating a victory.

Again, it was part of a bigger moment where the players and coaches let it all out.

"It means a lot," Snook said. "I absolutely love (assistant) Lilly (Gregory)

and Sara (Staley), but it's also my dad next to me. Being able to share those moments with him are definitely special."

That led everything to Saturday.

Prior to the match, Daniel spoke of the pressure being off. Her small senior class that included Lilly White, Madi Clark and Brooke Schafer had checked another box in program history by extending the season to the final possible day.

There is an odd sense of freedom in knowing it's the last match of the season and it's for the state championship. Perhaps it's the finality of knowing that it was all going to end in tears, either happy or sad — if not both.

Volleyball is a sport that offers a unique wave of emotion on every single point. But that passion came across different from the Eagles in Dayton.

Much has been said and written over the years about the cultural importance placed on sport in a rural community like Monroeville. All one had to do was look beyond the team benches and see the amount of black and yellow-clad fans in the crowd.

Even when it was over, and the loss had begun to settle in, there was still a frankness to the players.

When asked about taking the program further yet another step, White glanced at the state runners-up trophy sitting next to her on the table and quipped, "I'm glad we're at least taking something home."

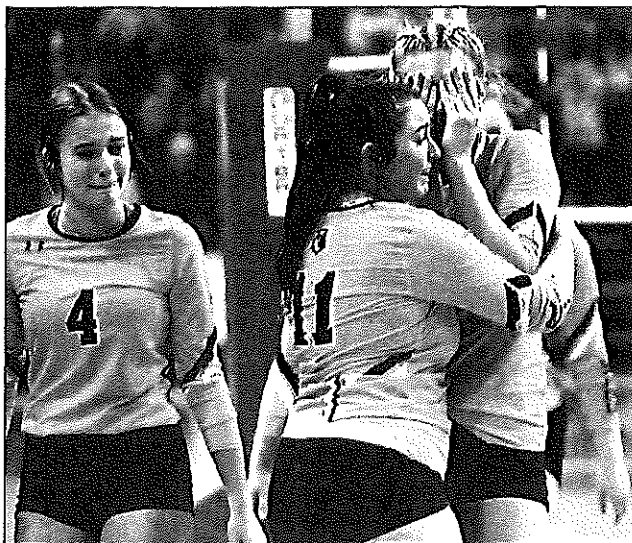
The delivery of that remark even drew a smile and laugh out of Daniel.

The words and the moment still hurt. As one of the top players in program history, Daniel wasn't afraid to hide that.

Led by four seniors with maybe a somewhat surprising tournament run based on the sheer dominance of it, the Eagles had left it all on the court — for everyone to see how much it meant.

"It was definitely overwhelming, but I kept looking to Madi and telling her what I wanted to run, and that I really, really wanted the ball," Daniel said of those final points where the Eagles staved off defeat as long as they could.

"I kept telling our everyone, 'We got this.' We needed to keep fighting."



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# As opposing coaches, brothers show why family matters

NORWALK

The moment wasn't when I expected it.

Though the game was predicted and expected by many for months, and in some instances, years, the 48 hours between it becoming official and tip-off Saturday night was about shifting the focus.

David and Chris Sheldon did a very good job of that. They both acknowledged the obvious. They are the oldest of five sons of Ohio High School Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Famer Rob Sheldon (450 wins). With more than 600 wins between them at Colonel Crawford and Western Reserve, both are successful in their own right.

Yes, their two teams were finally meeting in the tournament with a Division III district championship on the line at Norwalk High School. But both were quick to point out it was about the talented and players on the floor beforehand.

And frankly, their players proved that. When you get two teams that were a combined 46-1, and just two weeks prior were ranked No. 1-2 in the Associated Press state poll — the expectation is an epic game.

Certainly no one is disputing that after the Eagles' stunning comeback in the final minute of a 53-51 win over the Roughriders on Saturday in a packed NHS gymnasium.

But I had wondered the day before and the day of the game when a particular moment was going to come.

At some point, both coaches were going to have to let their guard down and acknowledge the obvious.

No, it wasn't the brief conversation and smiles during pregame warmups. We know all coaches do that as a customary sign of respect in most sports.

Instead, it came at the end of the national anthem.

Paige Sheldon, the 10-year-old daughter of David, stood at center court in front of about 2,000 people — and she's performed in front of a much larger crowd than that — and sang the anthem very well.

When she was done, as the crowd gave its collective approval, David went over first and gave his daughter a high-five. Seconds later, Chris was there to do the same with his niece.

And both walked back to their benches with smiles of satisfaction.

"Paige loves to sing and is in a lot of music-related things," Chris said. "She's done it down there for their home games and other places. Isn't she great? We asked her to do it and everyone here (at Norwalk) helped make it happen."

That's just an uncle talking about his niece, who he's watched grow up and seen at countless family gatherings. That was pretty obvious given the comments came 15 minutes after the game, which one could debate was maybe the toughest loss of Chris Sheldon's 20 years as the head coach at Western.

His team had lost a 17-point lead in the fourth quarter. Even further, they were still up nine points with 90 seconds left — and lost the game.

It was every difficult adjective you want to use. Crushing. Sickening. A punch to the stomach — or

anywhere else for that matter. Yet Chris was quick to shower his niece with praise.

Because family matters to him. At the other end of the court, it was also why David Sheldon couldn't keep it together. Sure, he was thrilled for his kids who he's obviously grown close to over the years. No one wants it to end after daily practices and games in the gym for four straight months, plus the offseason.

But he couldn't keep his emotions in check — not because of his team's incredible comeback. It was because family matters to him.

"We're moving on, but it's bittersweet for me," David said as he began to choke up. "Chris is the best. He's my best friend and I'm happy for these guys, because I love these guys right here... but I love those Western kids, too. I've grown up with them, and I just know that feeling."

While his players took turns cutting down the net in celebration, unsolicited, David went on to note that it was Chris who came to Crawford last summer. He spent an hour putting in his offense he ran a year ago when he had two 1,000-point scorers in Luke Rowlinson and John Skrada.

"And that's what we've done all year with (Carter) Valentine and (Mason) Studer," Dave said. "My brother is a great coach. What we do is from Chris and what we stole from him."

"I'm happy for our guys and our community, but it's just tough to talk about this, I'm going to be honest."

When the game ended, as Jude Muenz missed a last-ditch three-pointer for Western, he collapsed to the floor. Muenz had played a fantastic game — and in my eyes was the best player in the building that night.

As he sat on the floor with his

head bowed to his knees, Muenz was inconsolable. Anyone who has ever worn a sports uniform and forced to take it off in such a difficult and unexpected fashion knows exactly how he felt in that moment.

Several of Muenz's teammates were finally able to get him to his feet, and then charging toward him was a young man in street clothes.

Almost no one in that moment knew the feeling better than Muenz's older brother, Jacob. He held his sibling in a long hug and offered words of encouragement before he went to shake hands with Crawford players.

Jacob Muenz lost a tough district title game against Huron as a senior in 2013 as a player for Chris Sheldon. He knew what his brother was going through.

It was another brief moment of family being at the forefront.

While the medals were being distributed to both teams, Chris Sheldon sat on the bench, staring ahead blankly. His six-year-old daughter, Jordan, sat on the chair to his left. His nine-year-old son, Sebastian, and wife Kimberli, were behind them.

When David Sheldon was called up to get his medal, Chris shook out of his blank stare to politely clap.

And then Paige took center court again.

David sent her out to get the medal, then made a beeline to Chris on the bench, who he pulled up for a quick hug. He then patted Muenz and a couple others on the head and walked back toward the Crawford bench while wiping tears from his eyes.

"Seeing my brother at the end ... it's tough," David said. "I love that guy. It's tough. We talk every day. We step between the lines, it's our players. But before the game,

everyone brought it up ... it's about these kids, not us.

"And then after the game to see him sitting there ... it's tough. I don't have much to say. It's too hard."

It was an interesting contrast. David was unable to hide how difficult it was. And while not entirely unexpected as someone who's done these interviews with him for 20 years, Chris instead had one-liners.

"When the ball went up in the air, none of it was on my mind," Chris said. "Me and my brother have been fighting, battling and clawing ... the only time he's beaten me in the last 20 years is two nights on the basketball floor."

"All of those 478 rounds of golf, he can't touch me. So if I have to give him two wins out of 480 ... I'll let it be in front of a lot of people and let him feel good about himself for one night."

All jokes aside, the family tone struck a chord with me. You see, while Paige Sheldon was singing the national anthem, my 14-year-old daughter, Chloe, was across town on stage singing in the St. Paul High School "Children of Eden" musical.

I had long ago figured on being unable to attend her Saturday night performance, assuming either Western Reserve or Willard was going to be in that game — and that I would have no help to staff said game. But then I had given up my ticket to Friday night's show so her godmother, one of my sister-in-laws, could attend.

Suddenly during Paige's singing, all kinds of questions came into my head. Had I made a mistake? How was she doing? After months of practice, was she ready to be on stage with high schoolers?

Those thoughts got washed away over the course of the next two hours. Not only because it was one

of the greatest high school games in one of the best atmospheres I've been involved in — but because of seeing the family interactions.

I was at Chloe's musical on Sunday. Much like David Sheldon, now I was the one getting choked up while watching my pride and joy sing in a solo position while owning her performance up on stage.

Chris Sheldon was able to find solace and positive moments the night before while talking about his family in the immediate aftermath of a crushing defeat.

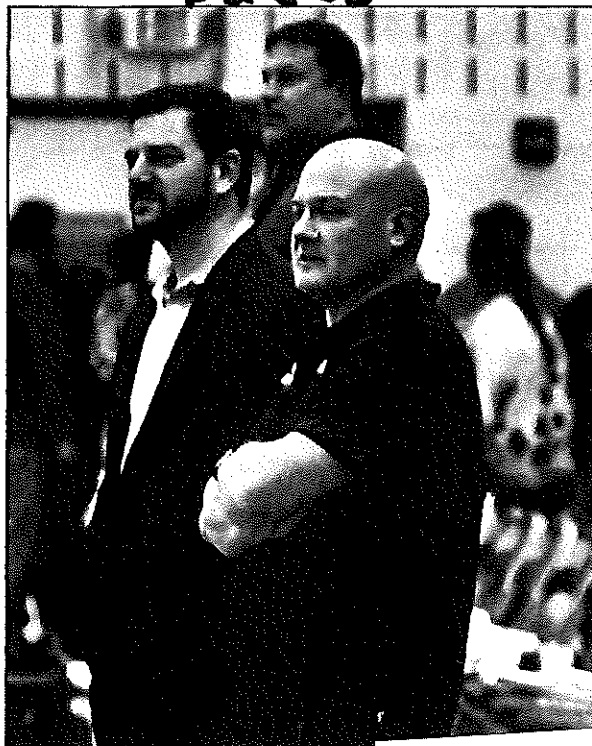
Also being honest, these last few weeks on the job haven't been great on my end. Add on my wife Megan's job as an elementary teacher, plus some long nights of homework and musical practice with my daughter, and some nights were downright difficult.

All in 24 hours, I saw friendly reminders and examples of how invested we become in certain things — but never enough to lose sight of family being most important.

"My brother is a hell of a coach and does a great job," Chris said. "It does almost feel like the older brother duped his little brother. There were a lot of times growing up where it felt like he was about to let me win, then he ripped my heart out at the end and sent me back to the house crying."

"Thankfully, I'm 43 and I know it's just a game now. It's a game that has been great to our family. It's something we invest a tremendous amount of time in, and come Wednesday, I'll be the biggest Eagles fan there is."

"But it's still just a game, and we're still the same family we were before tonight."



**LEFT:** Western Reserve head coach Chris Sheldon is embraced by his oldest brother, David Sheldon, following Colonel Crawford's 53-51 win over the Roughriders in a Division III district championship game on March 5 at Norwalk High School. The two siblings were the opposing head coaches in the game. **ABOVE:** Western Reserve head coach Chris Sheldon, left, stands with Colonel Crawford head coach David Sheldon, right, prior to the championship game. The two are the oldest of five brothers in their family.

Todd Stumpf

D2 C02

Umping once was enough

Division II Column

Column

My sports officiating career was long and distinguished. It lasted all of 90 minutes. That was enough for me to know that was enough for me.

In that time, it became abundantly clear why Ohio – and many other states – is facing a shortage of game officials. Who, after all, wants to do this?

I wasn't even officiating at the high school level in my one go-round. No, this was a championship baseball game between 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds. The stakes were not exactly high, or shouldn't have been.

And wouldn't have been, without adults involved. But when it comes to youth sports and other activities, nothing ruins things with more swift efficiency than so-called grown-ups.

The league in question doesn't normally have officials. It was decided they were needed to keep the adults – in this case, the coaches – away from each other.

The move paid off in that it kept the coaches apart. It backfired in that it turned the coaches – and the fans/parents/grandparents – against us, two volunteers trying to help.

Officiating is hard, I might add, even at that level. Balls and players move fast. I can't imagine how difficult it is at high levels.

Officials are going to miss calls. And they're going to miss every single one in the eyes of half the fans. And that half of the fans, which is usually wrong, is going to get delirious.

You expect that. What you don't expect is what else happened. After my partner made a blatantly obviously *correct* call, one side didn't like it. The grandfather of a player threatened to get a gun from his car.

I wish I was making that up.

It sure was fun explaining to my 8-year-old son, a player in the league, who went to watch the game, why the game was stopped for 20 minutes and multiple police cars arrived on the scene.

It was even more fun trying to explain why a game between kindergartners and first-graders meant so much to adults when it meant next-to-nothing to kids. The losing team had a water balloon fight afterward. That's what they'll remember.

The rest of us will recall the loony threatening gun violence.

While local athletic directors deny seeing it, area officials assigners will tell you the official shortage is real and a major concern that threatens prep sports. There are lot of reasons for the dearth of people calling games.

I've been around high school sports for three decades and I can confidently say that – among pay concerns, travel costs, other ancillary costs and anything else someone might blame – there is only one thing at fault when it comes to the rate officials are disappearing.

Parents.

As OHSAA Director of Officiating Beau Rugg said to reporters earlier this year, "Who wants to say, 'I want to do that so they can yell at me'? Nobody wants that."

And once you get an official on board, and he or she is accosted by fans (not to mention players and coaches), they're not going to stay on board long.

"How do you retain them after they're getting abused by these people?" said Medina resident Ron Fuller, an area assigner.

I officiated one game. There was a threat of gun violence after a perfectly correct call. You won't be retaining me.

Change that kind of stuff, change it soon and change it for good, or the answer to Fuller's question of how you can retain officials will be a simple one.

You can't.

*I never had any friends later on in life like the ones I had when I was 12. Jesus, does anyone?*

Truer words were never written.

Those final lines from the classic coming-of-age film “Stand By Me” were nailed like a hanging curveball. On the sweet spot, still rising when they cleared the fence.

Glaringly omitted from the tremendous couplet is that it’s true because most of us were playing Wiffle Ball at that age, in our back yards with our best buds.

We all had our version back in the day. For me and my neighborhood gang it was in the friendly confines of Shirey Stadium, with its short porch in right, Blue Monster in left and Polo Grounds-deep wasteland in center.

It was me and Rod and Rich and Steve, and sometimes a few others, doing battle during summers of the late-’70s (goodness, how old *are* we?), with a supply of plastic balls and bats and roll upon roll of heavy tape, which we used to protect our gear from cracks, all while basically weaponizing the normally harmless toy versions from our favorite pastime.

With all that in mind, and much more, I couldn’t help but grin this week while working on the story about R.J. Walgate and his friends, area prep baseball players from three different schools, and their Wiffle Ball adventures. And not just the fact that they won a national championship.

Instead it was just the fact that four friends got together to play. No adults, no uniforms, no umpires. Just balls and bats and kids.

Yes, it became much more than that. Social media gonna social media after all, and YouTube led Walgate’s discovery of Wiffle Ball beyond a neighborhood pursuit.

“I never anticipated when I started the league on that Facetime call, a year later, I’d be a national champion,” Walgate said.

Who could have imagined it? Wiffle Ball games, after all, took place in back yards in neighborhoods. They didn’t involve road trips and hotel stays.

Welcome to the age of technology.

Every time my generation has life made easier by something electronic, I marvel at how lucky the kids of today are to be living now, while at the same time pitying them for how much of their lives they lose to electronics.

Which is why Walgate and his friends’ story is so heartwarming. To me, at least. And probably to any going-on-old timers who used to stage backyard battles.

They’ve got the best of both worlds. They’re putting down their iPads, shutting off their Xboxes and Playstations and going outside. No game on MLB The Show22 will ever top a neighborhood showdown with plastic bats and balls.

The competition back in the day could indeed be fierce. But never as emotion-packed as the friendships. I am still in touch with all three of my daily Wiffle-buds to at least some degree. The subject even comes up from time to time, and it surely will again once I email out the link to this missive.

Walgate and his friends, years from now, will regale their families and friends – and each other – with tales from the Wiffle Ball fields. The stories will stay forever fresh, only getting old with age.

“It’s something,” Walgate said, “we’ll never forget.”

I guarantee it.

Because truer words were never spoken.

Joe Tait would have told just about anyone who would listen that he'd rather be at a high school game than a professional one. So while the longtime Cavs radio voice probably wouldn't like the fuss, he'd nonetheless love that an event in his honor is taking place inside a high school gymnasium.

On Dec. 26 and 27 Cloverleaf will host the second annual Joe Tait Classic, two days of basketball of every level from third-grade travel to varsity with boys and girls alumni games mixed in.

"Joe was a simple man with a legendary voice," Cloverleaf girls basketball coach John Carmigiano said. "I can remember growing up listening to him call Cavs games and I always felt like I was right there at The Coliseum. He had a real gift with his voice and we are so honored to have this opportunity to keep his memory alive for years to come."

Tait also happened to be a resident inside the Cloverleaf district, calling LaFayette Township his home until dying not quite two years ago of kidney disease and liver cancer. He loved the local prep scene and enjoyed his retirement years in the area after stepping away from the microphone a little more than a decade ago.

The event in Tait's honor is the brainchild of Cloverleaf graduate Scott Malarkey, a standout athlete at the school in the 1990s. Owner of a local dental practice, Malarkey befriended Tait by random chance and a friendship emerged.

"I'll never forget when he asked me if I could drive him to lunch to see his buddies, Tom and Tim," Malarkey said. "I told him sure. After arriving, I quickly realized it was (Indians radio play-by-play man) Tom Hamilton and (current Cavs radio voice) Tim Alcorn. He never made a big deal of all the fanfare or the great people he knew. He hated being fussed over, and in turn, made everyone around him comfortable because he treated everyone the same. He simply called you by your first name and asked how you were doing."

The story took a turn a while later when Malarkey took Tait to a Cloverleaf girls basketball game one winter.

"Like four years ago he brought him up here to do a Saturday afternoon game," Carmigiano said. "He said, 'You want Joe to announce your game?' I said, 'Heck yeah.' Joe just talked about how he liked doing that even more than doing a Cavs game."

Soon after, Cloverleaf coaches attended a leadership night at a Cavs game. Tait also was honored that night with a service award and sat at the same table as Tait, who made an impression beyond what already existed.

Soon an event was born and in its second year the Tait Classic again will be highlighted by scholarships given to one senior from each of Cloverleaf's varsity basketball teams. Last year the awards went to Ashton Newton and Laurell Brown.

"Everyone that knew Joe loved him, and the scholarships are awarded to students that are big in the Cloverleaf community, willing to give back to others, solid students, and are just all-around kind of people," Malarkey said.

The games will feature an appearance by current Cavs radio voice Alcorn, who will say a few words about his good friend Tait during the boys and girls varsity games, and will include playing of Tait's calls of various Cavs highlights over the years. Last year Alcorn introduced the starters for each varsity game.

"We wanted to offer an opportunity to bring our community together with one or more other school communities to provide a day to remember a legend while playing, and coaching, the game we all love," Carmigiano said.