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'Time To Stop'

Lee's Legendary Coach Retires After 897 Wins

MARK SELIG, Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG - Paul Hatcher retired Monday after 43 years as the boys' basketball coach at R.E. Lee High School. What's he going to do with his newfound free time? The 68-year-old figures he'll read novels, watch NASCAR and attend Shakespearean plays with his wife Judy.

Hatcher would not make a good subject for Shakespeare. Too many of his seasons ended too well.

The winningest basketball coach in Virginia High School League history, Hatcher finished his career with an 897-174 record, a remarkable 21-4 season average.

He won four state titles - in 1984, 1999, 2004 and 2005 - 13 regional championships, 22 district tournament titles and 33 regular-season district championships.

"That's something I'm proud of," Hatcher said Monday afternoon, taking a break from raking acorns at his Staunton home. "Of 43 teams, 36 of them played in district tournament finals. Every year, we were battling for a championship and that's all you can ask for from a team."

Hatcher didn't give specific reasons to explain why he retired at this point - less than a month before teams can begin practice on Nov. 7.

"I just felt like it was time to stop," he said.

Lee has not yet named a replacement. Principal Mark Rowicki said there isn't enough time to complete a full hiring process, so the school will try to name an interim coach within the week, and then hire someone full-time after the season.

Hatcher's son Jarrett has been an assistant at Lee - where he's also a government and U.S. history teacher - for 20 years, and would be an obvious candidate to replace his father. Rowicki said he has offered Jarrett Hatcher the interim job and is awaiting an answer.

The 40-year-old Hatcher said he doesn't yet know if he wants to succeed his legendary father.

"I'm not sure exactly what I'm going to do and I'm not sure the [permanent] job will be offered to me," the younger Hatcher said. "I've gone back and forth about whether I'd want to be head coach and follow my dad. I've had 20 years to make that decision and I still haven't."

Jarrett Hatcher played for his father and was one of many to reminisce Monday about the Bridgewater College graduate's career.

"The key to Dad's success is, he's the same," Jarrett said. "Guys that played in the '70s and '60s, guys I played with in the '80s - they can come to practice, and it doesn't look too much different from when they played."

Interim athletic director David Tibbs, who's been coaching football at Lee for 16 years, also mentioned Hatcher's constancy as a reason for success. As an example, Tibbs said the Leemen still use paper rather than cotton towels to wipe off sweat and that Hatcher made the junior-varsity team carry a trunk of the team's equipment to all games.

Everything was always steady at Lee, which won a state-record 85 consecutive games from 2003 to 2006.

"For us to lose a guy like that who's a living legend, I would compare it to Dean Smith leaving North Carolina, or whenever [Mike] Krzyzewski steps down at Duke, or when John Wooden left UCLA," Tibbs said.

Hatcher graduated from Bassett High School near Martinsville, and then played at Bridgewater College, graduating in 1966. He began coaching R.E. Lee's varsity team in 1968, and has sent players to some of college

basketball's major programs, including North Carolina and Georgetown.

While the Leemen have had great athletes during Hatcher's tenure, they also won because of discipline.

"It wasn't any razzle-dazzle," said former guard Eli Crawford, who won two state championships before graduating in 2006. "It was blue collar. We came in there and got the job done."

Crawford went on to play at Eastern Mennonite University and is now an assistant coach for the girls' basketball team at Wilson Memorial. Hatcher's influence on him is evident.

"I always tell kids the motto that we used - that I was grown up on from Coach Hatcher - was 'play hard, play smart, but have fun,'" he said.

Still, Hatcher could be a stickler for perfection. Jarrett remembers seeing his father watching game film one spring. The team had just gone undefeated and won the state title, but Hatcher kept rewinding and complaining about what was going wrong - even if there were few flaws to spot.

"His teams were so well-prepared and ready to play," former Harrisonburg coach Roger Bergey said. "They were very good at what they did offensively. And they were very tough defensively. And you had to take care of the basketball or they'd blow you out in a hurry. ... It was a great challenge for teams to play them."

Preparedness seemed to be Hatcher's strong suit, so it's a bit ironic that he isn't sure what to do with himself now that his career is over.

"I don't know what people do in the winter time," he said.

It's only fair that he goes to the plays with his wife, a former English major who he's been married to since 1966 and who's attended countless basketball games.

Asked what he learned about himself in the 43 years coaching, Hatcher responded, "I'm a poor loser, I guess."

Fortunately, he didn't have that feeling very often: R.E. Lee won about 84 percent of its games under Hatcher.

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