

Closing in on 800

Kortokrax could reach landmark win this weekend

The Lima News – Jeremy Schneider – February 18, 2010

You could call it the record that nearly wasn't. After playing basketball at Ottoville, Anderson University in Indiana and semiprofessionally in Lima, Richard Kortokrax needed steady work. He took a job teaching at Fort Jennings and begrudgingly agreed to coach the freshman boy's basketball team.

The next year, he was up with the junior varsity and the following year he was the varsity coach. That was the 1959-60 season – 50 years and 798 wins ago.

"I wasn't even sure I wanted to coach," Kortokrax said. "I always liked the sport of basketball. I always played it whenever I could.....I was reluctant, but I said, 'Well, we'll try it.' And here we go now. I never regretted what I did."

If Kalida beats Continental on Friday, Kortokrax gets his first shot at No. 800 on Saturday at Van Buren. He would be the first coach in Ohio to reach the number. Kettering Alter coach Joe Petrocelli is next with 780 wins through Tuesday. No one else has more than 700.

Eight-hundred wins. It's a number that boggles the mind.

"I never envisioned any coach in the state of Ohio winning that many ball games; just to coach in that many games, let alone to have won that many," former Columbus Grove

girl's basketball coach and athletic director Jerry Hoersten said. Hoersten played for Kortokrax at Ottoville, winning PCL Player of the Year honors in 1968.

"That's an outstanding feat that I don't think we'll ever see again in basketball in Ohio."

Kortokrax went 26-18 in two years at Fort Jennings and 199-82 in 13 seasons at Ottoville. Since coming to Kalida in 1975, he has rolled up a 573-218 record. All told, "The King" has 798 wins against 318 losses, good for a .715 winning percentage.

"They're always a tough act. He doesn't have 800 wins just by beating Fort Jennings, I can tell you that," longtime Fort Jennings coach John VonSossan said. "If you're going to have a winning record against him, you better do it in a matter of three or four years and get the hell away. In the long run, you're not going to have one."

Kortokrax has 22 Putnam County League titles, including at least a share of one this year. He has 11 20-win seasons, including a run of four straight in the early 1980s. There have been four trips to the state tournament with a championship in 1981.

"Those years stand out because everyone helps you remember them. Each step I took was a memory for me," Kortokrax said.

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Kortokrax has only endured seven losing seasons.

While everyone will remember the good times, it's in the tough times that Kortokrax built his legacy, according to his son Randy Kortokrax. The current boy's basketball coach at Columbus Bishop Hartley, Randy marvels at the consistency his father has put together over five decades, particularly at a small school where coaches have to play with what talent – or lack thereof – each class presents.

“That’s how you end up with 800; you take some teams and you squeeze out three, four, five more wins,” Randy said.

Randy sees his famous last name not as a burden but a benefit, even crediting it with giving him the final edge when Hartley hired him. His Hawks are 13-5 this season and received the fifth seed in the sectional tournament.

“Wherever I go it’s an automatic in. It’s a great first line,” Randy said. “Then there comes the point where I have to show I did learn from him..... I always want to live up to expectations because I don’t want to tarnish what he’s done.”

As with Randy, Hoersten followed Kortokrax into education and coaching. When Hoersten was the A.D. at Grove, he

would occasionally call Kortokrax looking for advice.

“That definitely influenced me to get into education in the first place,” Hoersten said, “and once I was in the field you try to pattern yourself after people that you might want to call your mentors and try to follow in their footsteps.”

When you stick around for 50 years, you build a legacy as well as a legend. Everyone has a Kortokrax story. Many are good, but a few are looked upon with cross feelings, such as the notorious practice schedules and film sessions Kortokrax holds.

However, Hoersten has a different take from first-hand experience. “There are probably a lot of stories out there about him having practices after games, on Sundays and stuff,” Hoersten said. “In the four years I played for him, we never did that. I think that might be a little bit of a myth.”

A look at his coaching history shows another 100-win plateau every six or seven years. With some good health and luck, who knows where the final number will end. “I still feel good. I still want to coach,” Kortokrax said.

Kortokrax record by school

*Fort Jennings	(1960-61)	26- 18
*Ottoville	(1962-74)	199- 82
*Kalida	(1975-	573-218