

One Decision Starts Hall Journey

Move to coaching girls' hoops led to 532 varsity wins at Ottoville

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OTTOVILLE – You might say Dave Kleman made the biggest and best adjustment of his coaching life in 1991.

That was the year he coached girls' basketball for the first time when he became Ottoville's eight grade coach for the 1991-1992 season.

A year later, he moved up to the girls' varsity head coach's job. And when he retired after 27 seasons a year ago, his team had won 532 games, 12 Putnam County League Championships, 14 District Titles and had made eight trips to the girls' State Basketball Tournament.

Twenty of those 27 teams won 20 games or more and the lowest win total in any of those seasons was 13.

That run of almost uninterrupted success made him one of four coaches who will be inducted into the Ohio High School Basketball Coach's Association Hall of Fame this year, including former Elida Boys' coach, Chris Adams.

The Hall of Fame ceremony was originally scheduled for later this month but has been moved to August 22 because of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

Kleman coached boys reserve, freshman and eighth grade teams at Van Wert, where he taught math for 37 years and also coached freshman boys at Ottoville.

He applied for the girl's head coach's job at Ottoville in 1991 but didn't get it and was asked if he wanted the eighth grade girls' job instead. After some debate and some advice from his wife Cheryl, he took the job, went undefeated and was offered the head coach's job when that position was open again in just one year.

"If you had told me when I was coaching boys at Van Wert that I'd be coaching girls, I would have laughed at you. But you know who was laughing? God! He steered me in the right direction and got me where I needed to be," Kleman said.

He had success right away at the varsity level when Ottoville won 20 games and went to the state tournament his first season.

At one point in the early years, the Big Green's boys head coach's job opened up and he was asked if he wanted it.

He didn't want it. Or maybe he just wanted the girls' job more.

"I had three girls coming up (his daughters Amanda, Melissa and Megan). I thought I had the program set up and ready to go and I wanted to stay with the girls. I was really surprised how much I enjoyed coaching the girls," Kleman said.

"I talked to my wife and she said, 'If you're really enjoying it, they why would you stop doing it'? It was not just the success; it was the rapport I had with them. I knew it was the right thing for me," he said.

While the wins kept coming, Kleman said he was a different coach later in his career that he was early in it.

He was never a screamer or yeller, but especially so as he became a more experienced coach.

"Yelling at them, really yelling at them? I did that probably five or six times over the years, really getting after them. I wasn't really upset with them but I'd tried everything else and nothing was working, so I tried yelling at them at halftime. And it blew up in my face every time," he said.

Also, he ways he learned a lesson about quality being more important than quantity.

"At first, I would scout everybody and see them at least once in person and a tape on them. I was killing myself with the scouting," Kleman said. "And we practiced way too much because I felt like I had to dot all the 'I's' and cross all the 'T's'."

"As I got older, I gave them a lot more days off and we didn't practice nearly as long. Once we got into January, we were lucky to practice an hour and a half. When we got into February, we might only practice an hour and 15 minutes and I gave them a lot of days off."

If there was any unfinished business when Kleman stepped away, it was that there was no State Championship trophy from the eight trips to the State Tournament. But he doesn't necessarily see it that way.

"I would not change anything. Sure, we would have liked to have won one or two or three of those. But I was so happy that those kids had an opportunity to play in the State Tournament. That was really special," he said.