

Kleman Garners 400th Coaching Win at Ottoville

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Saturday was quite a day for Ottoville girls' basketball coach, Dave Kleman. It started at 12:09 a.m. when he and his wife were informed their youngest daughter, Megan, had given birth to a baby girl in Cincinnati. On the insistence of his wife, they drove the two and a half hours to Cincinnati to see the newborn and the family.

"My wife made me, but she didn't have to twist my arm to hard," Kleman said of the early morning drive with a laugh. After an hour with the new family, they returned home and he got about three hours of sleep before heading off to a walk through with his girls' basketball team. He then returned home for another hour of sleep before ending the day at the Elida Fieldhouse where his Lady Green were playing Arcadia in the Regional Championship game for a trip to State.

Saturday had a perfect ending as Ottoville defeated Arcadia 55 - 41 and advanced the Big Green to their fifth State Tournament. Not only did the Big Green earn the right to meet Fort Loramie in the Division IV State Semi-Finals this Friday on the Value City Court inside the Schottenstein Center at The Ohio State University, but it was the 400th career win for Kleman as head coach of the Big Green.

"I know I got my 400th win, but I really have been trying to play that down," Kleman said. "Because I know it's not about how many wins I get, it's about the girls playing. And the fans were really nice to me and the girls knew it. It was like having a no-hitter when no one

was saying anything to you until after the fact."

Kleman now has a 400 - 95 record in his 21 years of coaching the Ottoville ladies.

While Kleman has had some very successful varsity teams at Ottoville he knows it is a tradition that starts back in elementary school as the young girls watch the varsity team and want to enjoy that success as well.

"I think part of it is those little girls in the elementary watching what the varsity is doing now and instilling that drive into those kids," Kleman says. "We have been successful with that since the first year we went to state. I think we had the young girls hooked and each generation keeps pushing the next."

The current youngsters have seen the Big Green put up some big numbers as this current group of seniors have been a part of 92 wins over the last four seasons as Kleman's teams have been right around the 20-win mark, including this year's 27-0 record. Three of the last four seasons the Big Green have reached the regional tournament with unblemished records.

"I know most of the little girls here and I'm always encouraging them to practice," Kleman adds. "They just light up when you talk to them and they are excited about it."

Kleman says he goes to as many junior high games as he can. At the beginning of each year, he talks with the coaches of the fifth and

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sixth grade teams to check in on them to see what is going on. Kleman says as long as he is showing interest, they see that it is important.

One of those little girls Kleman reached at a young age was current senior forward Rachel Beining. The Kleman's have reserved tickets for the boy's game next to the Beining's. When Rachel was young, three, four or five years old, she would sit with her parents and Kleman kept telling her that she would be playing for him one day. However, Rachel kept insisting that she was going to be a cheerleader. To make a long story short, Rachel not only turned out to be a very successful player for the Big Green but will be heading to Bluffton University next season to play college basketball. To this day, Kleman reminds them of that little girl that wasn't going to play basketball.

Another interesting fact pointed by a former Ottoville resident is that Kleman and his staff have been very successful while working with less numbers than bigger schools across the state.

"One of our main goal is to get as much out of the kids as we can, because we don't have a lot of kids in the school," Kleman says. "You are limited by the town you have, but you get your talent to be as skilled as you can. You can survive the years you don't have as good a talent. We are better basketball players a lot of times, but not great athletes. You don't always have the best athletes, but I like to think that we have the best skilled kids most of the time."

"The key is to get to them early and see if you can get them to do things early. Around here, when we have a good team, the parents have been involved with the kids when they are young by going to play with them. You can tell the ones that had their parents go out and play with them because they are so much more advanced. The parents are the first coaches we have by just getting out there and playing with their kids," Kleman says.

Another constant for the Big Green has been the coaching staff. While Kleman has been the head coach for the past 21 seasons, his assistant coaches have been at his side for many of those years. Although there have been a couple of changes over the years, current assistants Deb Lindeman and Vaughn Horstman have been a part of the Big Green system.

And although Kleman only has players for four years at the high school, they never really leave the program. At last Saturday nights Regional Final game, 35 of his former players were on hand to watch the game with Arcadia. It was a reunion that included two members of his very first team in 1994 all the way through last year's team. The group captured the moment with a group picture that everyone will be able to look back on and say they were part of these 400 wins and more to come as Kleman continues to lead the Big Green program.