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Newton coach may end legendary tenure

Covington – Back when Ron Bradley first started coaching at Newton County a mere 45 years ago, an occasion like Saturday night's would have been of standing-room-only significance. My, how times have changed here.



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Back then, the old gym at Newton would be packed every home game and elbow-to-elbow for a Rams playoff contest. Over the years, though, Eastside High was built in the county, which diminished the talent pool and fan base. Further, there is a third high school on the way.

Saturday night, maybe a few hundred bothered to come out to Newton. Still, those on hand for the Rams' state playoff game against East Coweta witnessed more than a competitive contest and glorious win; they very well might have witnessed history.

The winningest coach in Georgia high school basketball history just might have walked off the court named after him for the final time. Two years ago, he wanted to get in two more years. You do the math.

His win total stands at a mind-blowing 1,299 now, by virtue of his team's gutsy 45-37 victory over East Coweta Saturday night. It is the only the Rams' second state tournament win in 20 years.

"I'm just excited for the kids to have the opportunity to travel to Macon and play in that coliseum," Bradley said.

As for himself, the Sweet 16 appearance means only "that we're continuing to get better here, which is what we've wanted to do."

At 70, Bradley continues to feel about the game as he always has. "His heart beats to the thump of a basketball," said wife Jan, who has worked either the game clock or the official scorer's book at her husband's games for nearly 40 years.

Any decision on his future will come with the stamp of approval of his wife, he said, which makes her laugh. "I've been hearing 'This is the last year' for 20

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years," Jan Bradley said. "He has to quit at some time, but I can't imagine him not coaching."

Said Bradley: "I love it just as much. I'm just as excited and I still can't sleep much before a playoff game."

Still he might have walked off the court named after him for the final time Saturday night.

"I could retire soon," he said. "I'll sit down with my wife and we'll talk about it after the season."

Bradley started at Newton at 25 years old, moved on to six other schools before two years ago returning to where he started, which, at some point, is where he'll end his career.

This year's team was a revelation. "I wasn't sure we'd have a winning season," Bradley said. "But these kids have played their hearts out."

Saturday night exemplified the depth of the Rams' determination and Bradley's mind and skill. He has much to offer and nothing to prove, and yet he continues to teach and mold and prove that the game is very much still in his wheelhouse.

After his team had trouble defending the perimeter and scoring from the outside, Bradley switched to a pressure defense in the second half that gave his team some air.

"I wanted to open up the game for them, open up a flow and let them breathe a little," he said.

They not only breathed easier; they blew down East Coweta. The small crowd that did not know it had its eyes on history roared with excitement as Rudy Nolly and Todd Hoskins, among others, led Bradley's Rams to satisfying victory.

If Saturday night was goodbye for Bradley in his home gym, those who were there should feel honored for the historic experience. If he comes back for another year, they should be honored by that, too.

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