

Nothing ho hum about Warriors' streak

Written by Mark Dukes

Sunday, 06 February 2011 21:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 06 February 2011 22:06



Years ago, I learned a valuable journalistic lesson from a man who had a hand in winning the Pulitzer Prize.

I was a young reporter for the Cedar Rapids Gazette in the mid-1970s, assigned one Saturday to cover the boys' district swimming meet. Washington had won several team championships in a row and, to no one's surprise, captured another that day.

My lede on the story went something like this: "Ho hum. Another year, another district title for Washington."

The following Monday morning, I had barely taken off my coat in the newsroom when I heard a gruff voice, "Dukes, my office!" It was Jack Illian, then The Gazette's managing editor.

In the 1930s, Illian was one of the reporters who developed a series of stories on corruption and misgovernment in the State of Iowa, a body of work that earned The Gazette the Pulitzer Prize in 1936.

Illian was in the final years of his newspaper career in the 1970s, but still had a keen eye for good reporting and writing. He was a little like Ben Bradlee, the Washington Post editor who everyone got to know in "All The President's Men."

Tough, stern and particular, but fair. I knew when he called me into his office that it was either going to be really good or really bad.

"Son, I read your story on the swimming meet the other day," Illian started. (we're paraphrasing some, but the gist is here). "Not a bad effort but that lede is unacceptable."

Nothing ho hum about Warriors' streak

Written by Mark Dukes

Sunday, 06 February 2011 21:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 06 February 2011 22:06

“Do you think the swimmers thought it was ho hum? Do you think the coaches and the fans thought it was ho hum? Those people had nothing to do with the other championships. This one was special to them and you should have treated it that way. Remember that. Now get back to work.”

I was reminded of my encounter with Illian this past weekend when Washington won its 48th consecutive district boys swimming title. It is a remarkable streak that has spanned three coaches, hundreds of swimmers and hundreds of thousands of laps in the pool.

You'd think, at least by accident, one of the other district schools would break through at some time. You'd think maybe the talent pool would eventually dry up on the east side. But, no, it's been all Washington in the district meet for nearly a half century.



Washington's current head coach, Chris Cruise, wasn't even born when the streak began under the leadership of Hal Krizan in 1964. The district domination continued under Jim Voss, whose teams won an incredible 15 state championships. Cruise, a four-time state champion while swimming for Voss, has kept the streak alive for at least one more year.

Voss chuckled when I asked him if he remembered the story I had written, the subject of Illian's ire. "I remember that ho hum comment," Voss said. "I didn't really appreciate it. Each team is special. Every year is a journey and every year is a new team."

What are the common denominators over all these years? Why Washington?

"I'm not sure how to answer that," Voss said. "Back in the '50s when Washington opened and Hal Krizan started the program, he was able to establish a good program."

Nothing ho hum about Warriors' streak

Written by Mark Dukes

Sunday, 06 February 2011 21:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 06 February 2011 22:06

"I don't think there's anything magical about it, really," he said. "You try to find kids who know how to swim, you train them and you taper them. And we've built a community with parents who have gotten behind us. We encouraged parents to become involved, not in coaching but in support, and they have.

"We had times when we had kids who didn't think they could compete at the varsity level," Voss said. "My comeback was, if you're a freshman basketball player, you don't expect to play varsity, do you? One of the things that helped me to sustain things was to develop junior varsity swimmers.

"We focused our attention a lot on junior varsity swimmers, trying to develop them to become varsity swimmers. We had some pretty good junior varsity teams that I'm sure could have competed (in the district meet against other varsity teams)."

Voss said some of his most satisfying moments as a coach occurred when Washington didn't win.

"The best coaching job I ever did was when we finished fourth at state and no one expected us to be in the top 10," he said. "We had a lot of pressure on us as a program. We were expected to win.

"I remember one year we finished second and a student in the hallway asked, 'What happened to you guys?' Our expectations were not really to win but to perform at the highest level possible and hope that translated to winning."

Even Voss is somewhat surprised the streak has stood the test of time.

"Yeah, any streak like that is an amazing feat," he said. "It shows the stability of the program. When you have a strong program year after year, it's a different philosophy. Over the history of the program, we've been towards the top. So it's a different approach. You try to reload so to speak."

Nothing ho hum about Warriors' streak

Written by Mark Dukes

Sunday, 06 February 2011 21:51 - Last Updated Sunday, 06 February 2011 22:06

Reload, the Warriors have, 48 years running. Nothing ho hum about that.