

Role reversal for coaching O'Donnells

Written by Tom Fruehling

Friday, 30 December 2011 20:07 - Last Updated Friday, 30 December 2011 20:10



Around the girls, he calls him “Coach.”

As in, “Check with Coach about practice.”

“This is very definitely his program,” says Pat O'Donnell, the first-year assistant coach for his son Brian's Marion girls basketball team. “I'm just glad to help out in any way I can. Hopefully, some of my knowledge and experience can take a little of the load off of Brian.

“But he makes the decisions.”

For his part, the son is happy to have his dad beside him on the bench.

“He knows so much about the game. He sees a lot of the small adjustments that need to be made. And we think exactly alike. Coaching is about more than wins and losses.

“It's a bigger job than that. It's about developing character on and off the court. Doing what's best for the kids in life.

“Dad and I stress the very same things.”

Marion Principal Greg Semler, a friend for years since all three have strong ties together from Springville High School, says they make a good team.

Role reversal for coaching O'Donnells

Written by Tom Fruehling

Friday, 30 December 2011 20:07 - Last Updated Friday, 30 December 2011 20:10

"They're both fully committed to the kids and doing things the right way with no short cuts. Always very positive," according to Semler, who was a teacher and athletic director at Springville before coming to Marion. "And their teams play excellent basketball."

Brian, 37, took over a moribund Springville program in 2001.

Pat, 58, had started his own high school girls coaching career there in 1994 and had a good three-year run before moving over to Mount Vernon for seven years. His son, who'd spent a year as girls coach at Storm Lake St. Mary's and a year as assistant boys coach at Springville following his 1997 graduation from Mount Mercy, was his assistant at Mount Vernon for two years.

"When the Springville job came open," says Brian, "they'd had three coaches in four years after my dad left.

"I was still learning how to coach. But, luckily for me, that first group of girls really worked hard and bought into what I was trying to do.

"They set the tone. It was huge for me that they believed in my system."

His team didn't win a game the first year but came back the next to win nine. There was steady improvement, and in 2008 the Springville Orioles won the Class 1A state tournament. They were runner-up the following year, and Brian moved up Class 3A Marion last season (but continues teach history at Springville) when Sherryl Gaffney-Paige closed out a stellar decade-long career.

In his maiden year, O'Donnell's Indians were 6-16 but lost a number of last-minute heartbreakers. Most of the same players have posted a 7-1 start this season, with the first loss coming last week at Class 4A Prairie. And they're ranked 12th in the state in the latest poll.

Role reversal for coaching O'Donnells

Written by Tom Fruehling

Friday, 30 December 2011 20:07 - Last Updated Friday, 30 December 2011 20:10

This is a watershed week upcoming, starting on the road Tuesday and Friday against Center Point-Urbana and Benton Community, and Saturday at home against Dubuque Wahlert.

“These girls are hard workers, and they have great team chemistry,” says Pat O'Donnell, who sat out from coaching last year after two seasons at Gilbertville Don Bosco. “It's so much fun for me to be a part of it. And to be an assistant under my son. I appreciate him giving me the opportunity at my age.”

Brian says both he and the school administration jumped at the chance to add Pat to the coaching staff when longtime assistant Steve Fish decided to concentrate on baseball.

“He has a lot of basketball knowledge and a track record of success,” the head coach says. “And he still has the energy and enthusiasm for coaching.”

Having hired both of them over the years, Semler says the two have contrasting but complementary styles.

“Pat's sort of a fire-and-brimstone guy, and Brian's more cerebral and detail-oriented. But they're both intense and driven. And they have the same goals.”

Which is understandable since the father was his son's first coach back at LaSalle elementary school on the west side of Cedar Rapids.

Pat, who spent most of his adult working life as a salesman until starting Superior Express courier service 12 years ago, has long coached mostly as a sideline. He started with Brian, who was later an all-state basketball player at LaSalle; then son Casey, now 32, a multi-sport former Metro Athlete of the Year; and daughter Kelly, 29, a basketball and softball star at Xavier.

Role reversal for coaching O'Donnells

Written by Tom Fruehling

Friday, 30 December 2011 20:07 - Last Updated Friday, 30 December 2011 20:10

"I coached them in all sports, and they were all good," says Pat, himself a 1971 graduate of Regis High School. "And good students, too."

A lifelong resident of Cedar Rapids' west side, he coached hundreds of other youngsters, as well, in 20-some years at LaSalle.

He left Coe College before finishing his degree to raise his family, so he never got paid to coach until rules were changed in the mid '90s that allowed schools to hire coaches not on the teaching staff.

"That opened things up for a lot of guys like me," he says.

Son Brian, on the other hand, took the more traditional route and earned his teaching degree from Mount Mercy with an eye toward a coaching career. Even while a college student, he coached junior high sports. Now he's back to being on the bench with his dad, though their roles are reversed.

"It's worked out great," Brian says. "We really work well together."

Pat couldn't be happier to be in the action again.

"The other day," he says, "Coach told the girls that I was also his best friend."

"That was kind of nice for an old coot to hear from his son."