

Two coaching greats ride into the sunset

Written by Scott Unash

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Metro girls basketball will look, and feel, much different next season.

Two of the greats over the last two decades - and beyond - have stepped down from their head coaching positions. Larry Niemeyer at Jefferson and Dennis Roloff at Kennedy both departed last week.

Perhaps it was fitting that these two fine gentlemen both left within 24 hours of one another, because they are two of the best of friends on and off the court. In fact, Roloff was an assistant coach for several years at Jefferson under Niemeyer, learning many of the finer points of the game. They were lessons he took across town to Kennedy.

Both men had the same philosophy on the court. When each of their teams was at full strength and full of talented performers, you could count on full court pressure defense and turning that defense into points. If the game turned into a half court contest, each had their style of turning the game in their favor. For Jefferson it was the vaunted high-low game usually with two terrific posts. For the Cougars, usually more of a perimeter game relying on crisp cuts and precision passing. Both were terrific to watch and to broadcast through the years.

Each had their grand moments. Niemeyer sent two J-Hawk squads to the state title game, winning one back in 1993 with one of the great 5-player teams of all time, led by Karen Schulte, Kate Galligan, Christi Hebert and his daughter Nancee. That J-Hawk squad defeated a very good Solon team in the title game and I can still picture Larry Niemeyer being presented the "Red Jacket" given to the winning coach symbolic of winning the championship. He never looked happier.

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While Dennis Roloff never won a title with the Cougars, they spent many seasons over this century as participants, twice getting to the semifinals. Perhaps Roloff's greatest claim to fame was producing some of the state's best players. Chief among them was Anne O'Neill, who during her illustrious career became the all-time 5-player scoring leader in the state on a cold night at Dubuque Hempstead before moving on to play at Illinois and Iowa State.

What will be remembered most from these two terrific gentlemen, besides their impact on girls basketball in the Metro area, will be their friendship on and off the court. Most times after some tough hard fought games, both coaches and their wives would go to dinner with one another and discuss the game, or perhaps not even talk about the result. You just don't find that among coaches anymore during this day and age.

Don't worry about these two guys. Larry is still the Jefferson softball coach, and he will continue to religiously follow his beloved Chicago Cubs. Denny will have more time for his passion of fishing.

Both have said they would not be against coming back next year to coach in some capacity as well. Here's hoping they get that chance and continue to positively influence young people's lives. Both leave huge voids and big shoes to be filled. We will miss you guys next year for sure.

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