

Niemeyer has done everything but drive bus

Written by Tom Fruehling
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For a coach who never intended to devote his life to girls sports, Cedar Rapids Jefferson's Larry Niemeyer has done pretty well.

He not only has the most wins of any high school softball coach ever, but his lifetime record of 2,054-422 going into Monday night's substate home game with Waterloo East puts him more than 900 victories ahead of his nearest competitor, according to the national record book.

And as a girls basketball coach, his 861-328 mark ranks second in Iowa and 13th in the nation.

Those milestones span a 52-year career that began when the only teaching position he could land after college graduation in 1959 had girls coaching duties tacked on.

"I had an interview for a job in Geneseo, Ill., but I didn't get it," he says. "So I interviewed at Adel. The job there meant teaching six subjects and running the school newspaper.

"I wasn't really thinking about the coaching. But the job paid \$4,000 a year, and they gave me an extra 200 bucks to coach girls basketball. I'd never even seen a girls basketball game (it was six-on-six then)."

Now a flourishing suburb of Des Moines, Adel back then was just a tiny dot on the map.

"I remember the first game I coached was against Valley of West Des Moines. I had cotton mouth so bad I couldn't talk," he says. "We were 2-17 that first year, then 5-15 the next year. After that, we never had a losing year in the 18 years I was at Adel."

Niemeyer also started the girls softball and track programs there.

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"I went right from fall softball to cross country, to basketball, then track and summer softball. And I coached junior high sports. I did everything but drive a school bus."

His softball team at Adel won a state tournament when there was just one class, and he also won state titles in cross country and track. He's the only coach in high school history to win championships in four sports.

In 1978, Niemeyer moved onward and upward, taking on the challenge of reviving a downtrodden Jefferson girls program.

The 1993 J-Hawk girls basketball team, with oldest daughter Nancee as a star and sophomore daughter Noreen as a reserve, capped a 29-0 campaign with a state crown.

Jefferson claimed state titles in softball in 1983, 1997 and 1998. Niemeyer has been named National Coach of the Year in both softball and basketball. He's also in state and national Halls of Fame in the two sports.

But he's never coached a high school boys team, even though his only dream growing up was to be a major league pitcher for his beloved Chicago Cubs. He was born in Burlington, the son of a railroad man with an eighth grade education who started working at the age of 14 for seven cents an hour and rose to a high-level corporate job with the Burlington Northern railroad.

"My dad worked hard all his life," Niemeyer says. "I got my work ethic from him."

Niemeyer spent his high school years in Beardstown, Ill., and while still a sophomore took over as president of the local Little League and Babe Ruth baseball operations.

"I hired the ump's, did the schedules, ran the concession stand and was the P.A. announcer,"

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he recalls. "It gave me a taste of what it took to run a program, all the details that are involved."

A big, hard-throwing right-hander with a wicked curveball, he'd been scouted by the major leagues but blew out his arm through overuse in Legion ball and never signed a professional contract.

Still, while majoring in business at Western Illinois University, he spent summers living with his grandmother back in Burlington, working a night job with the railroad and spending his days coaching Babe Ruth baseball.

"The first year I got the players nobody else wanted," he says. "My second year, with those same players, we practiced all the time and won the league championship."

He found the same coaching principles worked just as well that fall at Adel, even with girls in a game he knew little about.

"Coaching has always been easy for me. Everybody is good at something, but some people never find it. I have a knack for coaching. It's what I do. It's the one thing I'm good at."

Although he has the reputation as a hard-nosed task master, Niemeyer says playing for him is simple.

"If you show up with a good attitude and do what you're supposed to do you'll be successful, whether it's softball or a job. I'm an old-school coach. I teach the fundamentals, and we practice them over and over.

"I don't yell at the girls or swear at them. They know what's expected of them and when they've done something wrong. So we work on it.

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"I always felt kids respect rules and structure. They want to do things right. And my job, as a teacher or a coach, is to help them be the very best they can be."

While he's turned out dozens of all-staters and college-level athletes, Niemeyer says his role is a small part of the equation.

"In anything, you get out of it what you put into it. I think I can help make an average player a good player and a good player a great one. Some you just have to jump start."

It's a system and a philosophy that has become a family franchise and a Jefferson tradition. Daughters Nancee, Noreen and Natalie all starred on their dad's teams and have coached for him, as well. Son Nick is in his seventh year as head softball assistant and also helps his father with basketball.

Wife Gwen, meanwhile, who he met and married while at Adel, has dutifully attended sporting events year round, including annual treks to Cubs spring training camp.

As he approaches his 74th birthday in September and is hoping to get yet another highly-ranked softball team to the state tournament, Niemeyer says he's not sure how much longer he'll be working his magic.

He retired from the teaching business at Jefferson in the spring but is committed to coaching for at least one more year.

As he's been known to say, "Why don't people just leave me alone and let me coach."