

'Coach Eddie' Era opens at Jefferson

Written by Tom Fruehling
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The new version of Jefferson girls basketball is sort of like children's book characters Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel Mary Anne, who always dug faster and better the more people watched.

In their debut Friday night under first-year coach Jason Edwards, the J-Hawks seemed to hustle faster and better the more the coach chattered.

And since "Coach Eddie," as the girls call him, keeps up constant banter from the bench, his team showed the same frenetic fast-paced tempo in the finale of the 10-team Jefferson Jamboree scrimmage.

"Alright, nice job," Edwards chirped, time and time again.

"Good look. That-a-girl. Heads up. Move the ball. Nice block. Good pass. Talk to each other now. Way to hustle."

A missed free throw drew his calming advice to "step back and take a deep breath." After a traveling call, he'd say, "OK, slow it down just a little bit."

And when diminutive 5-foot-3 guard Autume Starks was decked going in for a fastbreak layup, Edwards didn't call for a foul but instead rallied her teammates on the floor to "hustle on over to her and help her up."

With Edwards, it's all positive, all the time.

"I believe you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar, so to speak," says the 39-year-old minister's son who has served as a counselor at Jefferson for the past four years. "I want to develop positive relationships. I love working with young people, and I know how

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positive relationships can impact their lives.

"I want the girls to know the game, too, and to compete on a high level and be successful. And I think we will be.

"But it's about more important things than wins and losses.

"I have a 6-year-old daughter (Jaciana), and I see the girls on the team as being role models for my daughter."

Like Larry Niemeyer, the legendary coach he replaced this year at Jefferson, Edwards came into coaching girls basketball by accident.

Niemeyer started his storied girls softball and basketball career 53 years ago because it went with the only teaching job he could find at the time at small town Adel in central Iowa.

Edwards, a 1991 graduate of Washington who earned a degree in sociology and ethnic studies from Cornell College four years later, was a volunteer grade school boys coach at Jane Boyd Community House when the Warriors' Frank Howell asked him to join his staff.

"I'd never thought about coaching girls," says Edwards, who spent eight years as a community liaison at McKinley Middle School before earning a master's at Drake University and moving to Jefferson. "But Frank heard I was good working with kids, and he gave me a chance.

"Sometimes it takes someone to believe in you and help you grow outside of your comfort zone."

Edwards learned the game at Howell's elbow for eight years. He was also an assistant on the Washington football staff, a position he's held at Jefferson for the past two years.

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As he takes on the head job for the first time, he's optimistic about the J-Hawks' prospects this season.

For starters, he has five standout seniors who barely played together last year in Rachel Broghammer, Kaitlyn Davidson, Danie Stromert, Taylor Jacobson and Maddie Koolbeck. Plagued by season-ending injuries last year, Jefferson had only Koolbeck and Stromert in the lineup for most games.

"Those girls have been playing together for years," Edwards says. "They've had some ups and downs. But on the court they really complement each other.

"And Coach Niemeyer built a rich tradition here at Jefferson. I'm fortunate that there's such a strong foundation.

"Really, I'm humbled by it. I just hope I can maintain it and re-energize it."

At 5-foot-8, he says he learned early on that he was too small to play competitive basketball himself. But he was on the track team at Cornell and played football there for four years as a defensive back and then as a running back.

"I wouldn't say I was a star by any means," says Edwards, who in those days was known as "Sweet Pea" by his teammates. "I scored my one touchdown as a senior. But I learned that hard work pays off. I may have been short, but I played big. I played with heart."