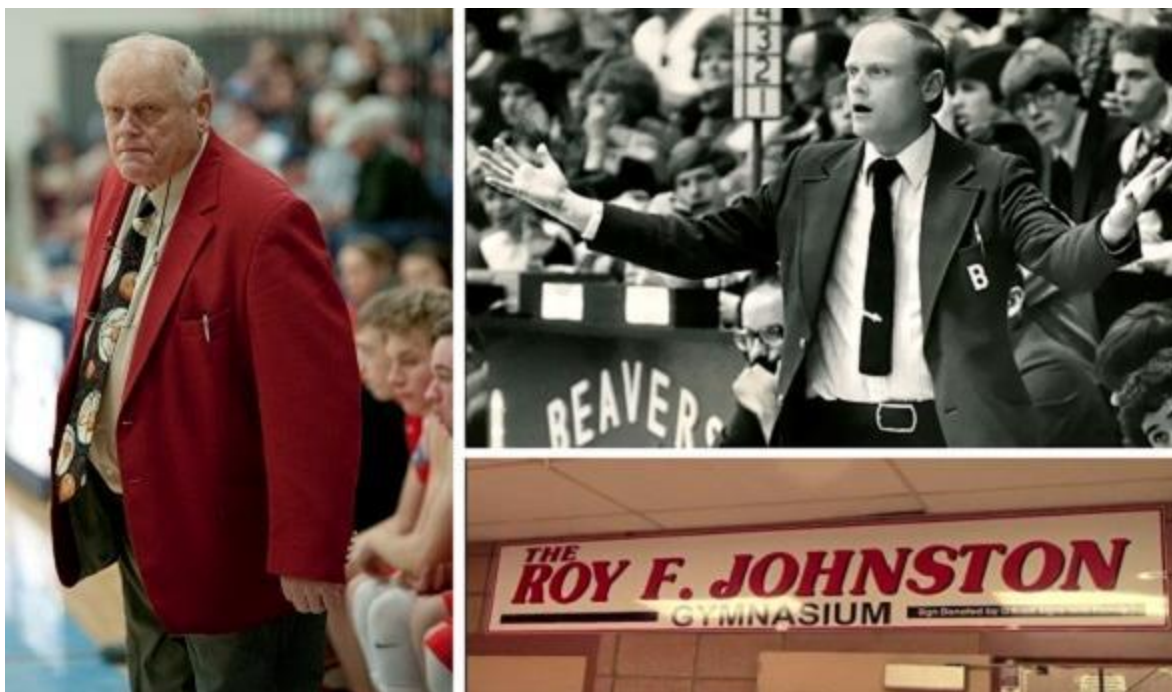


BEAVERTON LEGEND WINS NEARING RECORD



BOYS BASKETBALL

Posted Wednesday, January 18, 2017

By Paul Costanzo
Special for Second Half



Roy Johnston is three wins from tying and four from breaking the all-time wins record for boys basketball in Michigan.

But the longtime Beaverton coach isn't interested in reflecting, at least not yet. That's just not his style.

"During the season, you just concentrate on – at least I do – the games you've got coming up for the week," Johnston said. "When you start reflecting on things, you're not doing justice to what's on hand."

Johnston, who took over the Beaverton program in 1974 after short stints in Yale and Howell, has a career record of 725-301. Longtime River Rouge coach Lofton Greene holds the record for wins in the state at 728.

"There's so much pride in our community," said Shad Woodruff, Beaverton's junior varsity boys coach and a former player of Johnston's. "Beaverton basketball brings our community together. Beaverton basketball and Roy's program brings our small-town community together. It's a big feather in our cap, and we're proud to have Roy and what he means – we understand that not every place has something like that."

"To really validate it with the all-time wins record, and be able to say our school has that – you can't beat that."

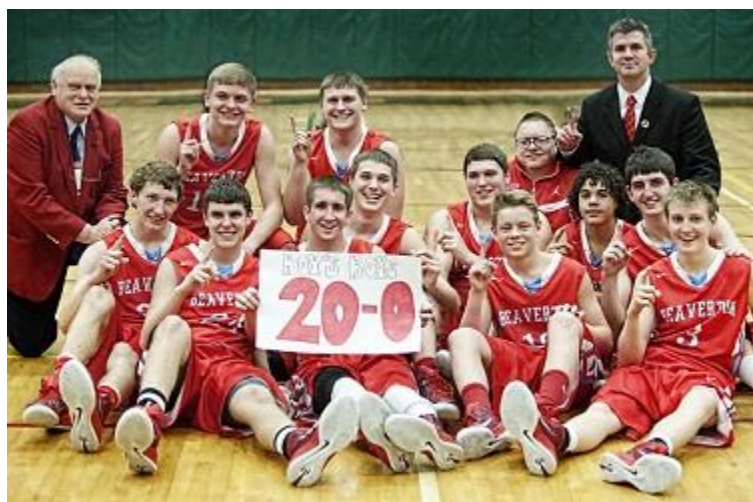
Building a program

Johnston graduated from Croswell-Lexington High School. He attended Adrian College for a semester, playing on the basketball team, before transferring to Eastern Michigan University. While there, he got his nose wet in coaching by helping in Ypsilanti.

He earned his first coaching win during the 1966-67 season at Yale. He was 13-24 with a District title in his two years at the St. Clair County school before he moved to Howell, going 5-28 in two seasons there.

After meeting with the Beaverton High School principal at a deer hunting cabin, he was on the move again – this time to the place he would make his home.

Johnston – who had been teaching high school classes – took a job as a fifth-grade teacher and JV coach in the fall of 1970. He took over the varsity program in 1974 and started winning immediately, going 16-8, 23-2, 18-3 and 22-2 in his first four seasons with three District titles, three conference titles and a Regional title during that stretch.



“Most of it was just discipline,” Johnston said. “I had to make sure the ballplayers got on the same page and that everybody had one common goal. So it was just a matter of making sure kids were disciplined, played with each other and did what you practiced.”

Eventually, players who entered the program knew what to expect and what was expected of them before they stepped foot on Johnston’s court.

“That takes a long time to create that environment,” Woodruff said. “He’s been there for 45 years, so it doesn’t happen overnight. But it does start to coach itself. When kids walk through the door knowing, ‘I have to bust my tail,’ part of that job is

already accomplished for you. That’s what a program is. It’s no different than Alabama football.”

In his 42 seasons at Beaverton, the Beavers have won 20 conference titles, 15 District titles and five Regional titles. The team made a run to the Class C Semifinals in 1984.

More impressive, however, is the consistency. In his 42 seasons at Beaverton, Johnston has had just five losing seasons, and one of those still featured 10 wins.

“It has been stable,” longtime Beaverton public address announcer Scott Govitz said. “He is just a guy that is very disciplined in what he does and his coaching. It’s all about doing things right and repetitiveness. He doesn’t run dozens of offenses. He’s a stickler for defense. He just instills in every player that they’re going to have to work hard.”

Community gatherings

Don’t mistake discipline for not having fun, however. Beaverton basketball games are an event.

“(Games are) a community gathering, especially on Fridays,” Govitz said. “You can see as many as 10 kids clamoring to be water boy, hear the pep band with a director that’s been around 30 years and after each game, the floor fills with community members having conversations while dozens of kids race to one end to shoot baskets before the call comes to put the balls away. It’s just a real tradition.”

Beaverton’s student section, the Bleacher Creatures, won the MHSAA’s Battle of the Fans contest in 2014.

The team gets into it, as well, as pregame introductions include the Beaver Shuffle and the Beaver Slide (see video below). The final player introduced makes a run through the student section and slides from about halfcourt into his teammates waiting near the bench.

Even Johnston has his own very visible tradition, wearing a red blazer for every game.

The fun offers a bit of a window into who the coach really is.

"Roy is a disciplinarian, and he's demanding," Woodruff said. "But I've said this for years, if you think you know Roy Johnston by sitting across the gym and watching him coach, you might have a different perception. If that's all you know Roy from, you don't know Roy.

"He loves his kids. He expects a lot of us, but he loves his kids and he loves his community."

Beaverton may not be Johnston's hometown, but it certainly has become his home.

"I think that we have been very fortunate in Beaverton," Johnston said. "We have had great teachers, we've had great administrators, and for the most part, we have had very good board members. I look at other places that go through a lot of turmoil, and we've been very fortunate."

Johnston's family has also been part of the tradition, including his wife Judy, who has served as his statistician. Two of his sons, and his three grandsons who grew up the district, have played for him. His daughter Jennifer (Northern Michigan) and son Jeff (Michigan Tech) each went on to play college basketball.

"I've had three grandsons live in the district, and I've had all three of them," Johnston said. "Not too many guys have had that pleasure that I've had. It's always been special, all along. I'm very lucky and very fortunate to have had the opportunity to coach those three."

Spanning generations

The youngest of the grandsons, Carter, is at the center of this year's squad which is 7-1 and sure to push Grandpa over the all-time wins mark.

It's this latest group, which has included grandsons Carter, Spencer and Grant, that has accelerated Johnston's chase for the record.

Since the 2012-13 season, Beaverton is 94-10, giving Johnston his winningest stretch near the end of his storied career.

"He has had multiple generations that he's coached, and he does a lot of the same things with the kids," Beaverton athletic director Ryan Roberts said. "He's really good with the kids, getting them involved. I have an 8-year-old boy who sits at the end of the bench, along with about a half dozen others.

"All of the kids and most of the people in the town here have the utmost respect for him, know what he's doing and how he is."

For Johnston, reaching out to multiple generations of high school athletes isn't as complicated as some make it seem.

"They are different, but high school kids and kids at that age are going through the same things we all went through at that age," Johnston said. "Yeah, they've got cell phones that we never had, but they're still going through the transition of being a little kid and becoming an adult. It's something that we've all gone through.

"If you were out of coaching and came back, I think you would see a difference. Whereas I haven't been, so you kind of grow with it. Kids are kids, always have been."

Whenever the record is broken, several generations of Beaverton players and fans will be on hand to watch it. The Beavers play their next three games on the road before settling in for four straight home games Feb. 1 through Feb. 10.

Johnston is trying not to focus on it, but even he admits breaking the record will be special.

"You have to be concerned about your players and how to get them ready for the next game," Johnston said. "My JV coach is the one who worries about most of this stuff, more than I do. It's just another step.

"It's more than that, let's face it. But it's another step."

Others have no problem admitting that it's much more than that. Woodruff became emotional thinking about the moment and all that Johnston has meant to him throughout the years.

Govitz said the community is already starting to fill with anticipation of the milestone victory.

"We're a small community, and in small communities you have to rally around whatever successes you have," Govitz said. "In this community, there's a huge love for our school system, and this is something that really shines a positive light on our school system. It's a point of pride.

"I'm already seeing more people in the stands. There's a buzz in the community. There's a buzz in the other communities that surround us. There's a lot of communities that can point to state championships on their signs. This is one of those markers for us that will be around a long time."



Paul Costanzo served as a sportswriter at The Port Huron Times Herald from 2006-15, including three years as lead sportswriter, and prior to that as sports editor at the Hillsdale Daily News from 2005-06. He can be reached at paulcostanzo3@gmail.com with story ideas for Genesee, Lapeer, St. Clair, Sanilac, Huron, Tuscola, Saginaw, Bay, Arenac, Midland and Gladwin counties.

PHOTOS: (Top) Beaverton coach Roy Johnston, at right in 1984 and left more recently. The gymnasium at his schools bears his name. (Middle) Johnston, far left, celebrates an undefeated regular season with his 2014-15 team. (Photos courtesy of Stephanie Johnston.)