

Veteran coach comes home after acclaimed career



George Lancaster

By Susan Kyte

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Chase City native George Lancaster has come home, retiring earlier this year from coaching high school basketball at Highland Springs.

“I have not reached the pinnacle of my career,” said the man who with 704 wins stands as number four among the list of winningest high school basketball coaches in Virginia according to the Virginia High School League. For his second act, Lancaster will serve as head varsity girls basketball coach at Bluestone High School.

Lancaster’s win/loss records only tells part of the story of this man who has been breaking down racial barriers and inspiring students during his thirty-four years as a teacher and coach.

Graduating from West End High School in 1962, Lancaster said he knew he wanted to teach. “Mama wanted me to be a preacher, but one day she heard me on the ball field and knew from my language that was not going to happen,” he says with a laugh. “My ministry is through basketball. It gives me a platform to inspire upward mobility.”

He came from a family of educators. His mother was a teacher at West End before becoming a counselor at Virginia State. His father had been principal at Mecklenburg Training School. Two aunts, his sister, brother-in-law and even Lancaster’s first wife were teachers or college professors.

Graduating from Virginia State, Lancaster said he returned briefly to Mecklenburg County where he taught health and physical education and coached. After four years, he headed off to Richmond to teach and coach at Huguenot High School. He became the first black head coach in the school’s history and one of the first in Henrico County after integration.

Lancaster said his focus was always on the students and what they could achieve. He remembers being hurt when his ex-wife once told him, “I believe those kids mean more to you than you love me.’ I denied it for a long time, but now I admit she was right.” In three years, Lancaster turned the Huguenot basketball team around. “We went from winning two games in my first season, to losing two in my second, and being undefeated in the third year.”

He doesn't take credit for that record. Instead he says, "so many people supported and believed in me."

In 1979, administrators at Highland Springs came calling. "They were having race relations problems at the school and I was known as a disciplinarian. I believed in certain values, and they are still important today," such as you play for the love of the game. "That's why I was hired. I was the best person to coach that school at that time."

He started by coaching girls basketball at Highland Springs before assuming the mantle of head boys basketball coach. Along the way he won two state championships in 2003 and 2007 and was inducted into five separate Halls of Fame, Virginia State University, West End High School, Highland Springs, Virginia High School League, and last year the Virginia Interscholastic Heritage Hall of Fame. Throughout his tenure at Highland Springs, Lancaster said he received tremendous support from the players and parents of both races.

When Lancaster won his 700th game, earlier this year, Highland Springs High School rewarded him by naming their basketball court for him, embedding the name 'George Lancaster' in the gymnasium floor. He won four more games before retiring his sneakers and returning to Chase City.

Again, he takes no credit for these successes. "I got a laurel for being in the right place at the right time and due to a span of years. You can't win without great players and great persons on your teams."

As far as race relations go, Lancaster credits Bob Howerton with doing more for race relations outside of the school system than anyone he knows. "By featuring kids in his stories he facilitates worthiness of players regardless of their race. You know, the media has a great responsibility to show the possibility that exists in all athletes. Those who are most successful reach that level because of self-esteem, because someone sees something in them they don't see in themselves. That's what Bob has done for these local players."

As for the future, Lancaster said he is looking forward to his time with the young women at Bluestone High School. "I love coaching the girls. They pay attention to what I'm saying." Right now, he's teaching the team the "terminology of the game. They have to know what I'm talking about before they can play."

He's also planning a fund raiser, hoping to raise enough money to purchase sneakers for each member of the team. He has no date set, but says it will be a golf fund raiser at Mecklenburg Country Club in Chase City. Any additional funds, Lancaster said he'll use to purchase equipment and uniforms for both the varsity and junior varsity teams.

He said he refuses to pressure anyone to play. He sees his jobs as supporting and then motivating, especially those students who choose to play basketball. "I'm here to hone the skills these players already have."

"We have a motto, 'Standing on our own feet.' I want these girls to use their feet to succeed on the court and then leave the area for experience, before returning and giving back to the community."

His hope is that they become local leaders like "Dale Hite, Kelly Puryear, Alvin Johnson, and James Evans, all of whom live here and who made a lot of sacrifices during their time." He calls them some of the best persons he's ever known and coached.

Why is Lancaster doing this, returning to coaching at 71 years of age? "For the love of the game," he says. "Love is one of the greatest influences of all. It is pure heart and soul and not looking for anything in return."

