

SPORTS

Coach's success helps make up for lost time

By Mike Latonia
Staff writer

The ideal time to break into college coaching, Bob Ward asserted, is when you're fresh off campus yourself. When you're young and hungry. With no ties. Willing to go anywhere and work round-the-clock in order to move up the ladder.

Ironically, Ward himself didn't travel the path he suggests. By the time the coaching bug bit him hard, his young adulthood had largely passed. Still, rather than say "what if," Ward plunged into a new career path while in his mid-30s — leaving behind a longtime teaching position in the process.

"It was a difficult choice. It wasn't like I hated teaching," Ward said.

But thus far, Ward's roll of the dice has come up all 7s. As the St. John Fisher College head men's basketball coach since 1987, he has amassed a 202-88 record — one of the nation's finest among NCAA Division III coaches.

Even though his added duties as the college's athletic director make for a brutal schedule, the grind hasn't seemed to burn Ward out. Arriving to work in shorts on a recent morning and brimming with enthusiasm, the 51-year-old could have passed for a man several years younger.

"If I'd stayed teaching, I'd be ready to retire in three or four years," Ward remarked. "There were times during the day when I'd look at the clock and think, 'It's still an hour until the day is over.' But with basketball, I've never looked at the clock."

Many days, he barely has time to steal such a glance. When basketball practices begin this fall, Ward will embark upon a six-month odyssey of 80-hour work weeks, going on the road several nights per week.

Ward said the schedule crunch can force a coach to make sacrifices in other areas. "This is going to take a toll on some part



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

St. John Fisher College men's basketball coach and athletic director Bob Ward speaks to athletic trainer Mary Irving on the school's campus during football practice Aug. 21.

of your life — parents, wife, girlfriend, children," Ward said. "This is clearly a job where wives and girlfriends have to realize that things change. If they don't, you're going to have problems with that relationship."

Ward said that fortunately his wife of two years, Kim, a ski coach at Newark High School, has that awareness.

"It's just a matter of her understanding that I don't have a normal job. I think it's because she understands sports," he said.

Even during the "slow" periods in the summer, Ward said, he works 40 to 50 hours a week, traveling to summer basketball camps around New York state.

"It's the ability to evaluate talent. It's about trying to find a kid who's better than he looks on paper," Ward said.

Ward said that recruiting at an NCAA Division III college such as St. John Fisher

is a different chore than, say, nearby Syracuse University, where some of the nation's best players contend for roster spots.

"We don't have scholarships, so it's inconsistent," Ward said. "It takes a lot of hard work. We don't have any dead periods, but I'm not whining about it. It's just my job."

And what a job he's done. Even though Ward had no previous head coaching experience in high school or college, he has thrived at St. John Fisher. The Cardinals have logged winning records in all 11 of his seasons, receiving NCAA Division III tournament bids five of the past six years. Ward's winning percentage stands at .697.

Last year's squad was Ward's best, finishing with a 22-4 record. With seven of his top nine players returning, Ward's 1998-99 group has the potential to vault the Cardinals past the NCAA tournament's second

round for the first time ever.

Ward was a multi-sport athlete at Rush-Henrietta High School and still belongs to his Catholic parish from childhood, Good Shepherd in Henrietta. Ward also played football at the University of Rochester and then taught social studies for 15 years at Honeoye Falls-Lima High School.

Ward ventured south in the early 1980s when he enrolled at the U.S. Sports Academy in Alabama to pursue coaching. He later served as assistant basketball coach at Division I George Mason University where he was a fellow assistant with current Clemson University head coach Rick Barnes.

Upon his return to Rochester, Ward assisted at Rochester Institute of Technology and Nazareth College. He became St. John Fisher's head coach and athletic director in the fall of 1987.

As the 1998-99 school year begins, Ward is excited about entering his 12th hoops season as well as plans for a large-scale renovation of the college athletic facilities. Even so, he admits, there are times when he dreams of success at a higher level.

"It's totally intoxicating for young coaches — 'I want to be in the Final Four.' We all have egos. Even at my age, I fight it," Ward said.

However, Ward is satisfied with his achievements despite his late career start.

"I think my record has spoken for myself. The thing I have to realize is that I made a choice when I was 35 that other people make when they're 22," he said.

Ward said he'd mildly consider coaching elsewhere, especially if a friend such as Barnes were to land an NBA job and need an assistant. Otherwise, Ward has no qualms about ending his career at Fisher.

"The campus and the people here, this is a quality environment. There are a lot of clean, healthy amateur athletics happening here," he said.

Fall Registration Has Begun!

- Expert Instruction
- Gymnastics for Boys & Girls Ages 6 Months-Adults
- Beginners to Highly Advanced
- Competitive Teams
- Cheerleaders Welcome
- Ballet
- Prime Time Nursery School



The GYMNASTICS TRAINING CENTER
OF ROCHESTER, INC.

2051 Fairport Nine Mile Pt. Rd. • Penfield, NY 14526
388-8686 ©1998GTC

Our Motto "Safety First, Last and Always!"



Come try us out
1 FREE WEEK
with this coupon only

FLEX
Gym & Aerobics Center

3 MONTHS

605 Culver Rd.
Rochester
654-7122

Only
\$99

Nautilus
OF PITTSFORD
4 MONTHS

25 Lincoln Ave.
Pittsford
248-6298

NEW FIRST TIME MEMBERS ONLY

MCQUAID
HIGH **JESUIT** SCHOOL



"... run so as to win."

— I COR. 9:25

Open House
November 8, 1998 • 5-7 pm

716-473-1130

world wide web: <http://www.mcquaid.org>