

Writer reflects on a coaching legend

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

IRONDEQUOIT — When I approached Ed Nietopski for an interview in early April, he liked my pitch about as much as if I'd heaved a baseball over the backstop.

Too much time in the spotlight following his announced retirement in March from coaching, he explained. No more kudos, please, for those Section 5-record 545 basketball wins. Or the titles. Or the various Hall of Fame memberships.

"It just seems like it takes away from the players," said Nietopski, 76.

I wasn't surprised at his humility. Not once have I known him to insinuate during our many interviews that he knew a thing or two about coaching.

Although we did end up getting together, I opted not to pain him with too many questions — because, the more I thought about it, I already had a book's worth of memories through my association with Nietopski that began 20 years ago when I wrote sports for the *Greece Post*. A few moments stand out:

In 1984, while he was head baseball coach for Cardinal Mooney



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Former Bishop Kearney head basketball coach Ed Nietopski consoles senior Jamar Gray March 12 after Gray played his last game during the Class B state quarterfinal game at Buffalo State College.

High School, a foul ball sped toward Nietopski at the third-base coaching box. He crouched and clapped his hands, fielded the ball cleanly, and whipped it back to the pitcher — all in one fluid motion, as if he were still playing shortstop for the Rochester

Red Wings as he did in 1950. Always a kid at heart.

Once I stopped to see Nietopski on an early-spring Saturday morning. He was the only soul to be found on the Mooney athletic fields, driving a tractor to smooth out the baseball diamond. As if already being a coach, teacher and athletic director wasn't enough. "There's somebody who does things all the way," I remember saying to myself.

When Mooney was closed in 1989, Nietopski — then 61 years old — was a coaching legend after a quarter-century there and seven previous years at Brockport High. But he hadn't gone all the way yet, not even close.

He spent the next 15 years at Bishop Kearney High, ending his 47-year coaching career this past March by winning his seventh Section 5 basketball title — and sixth at BK — for a career record of 545-321. He also owns four sectional titles and a 705-201 career mark in baseball (he retired from baseball and teaching in the late 1990s).

Nietopski demanded that his players go all the way. He said his most painful times were cutting athletes who tried hard but lacked talent, and

seeing players blessed with ability who squandered their gifts.

Nietopski goes all the way with his faith. He regularly attends weekday Mass, and he's turned down several lucrative coaching offers due to his love of Catholic education.

The same with his commitment to marriage. Once I bumped into him and his wife, Betty, at the movies. As my wife and I watched them exit the theater, hand in hand, we remarked how many married couples don't hold hands after five years of marriage, let alone 50 (now 53).

Nietopski plans to continue volunteering at St. Joseph's House; maintain his summer basketball camp at Kearney; and help out at BK in other capacities. Now, however, the father of seven and grandfather of nine looks forward to visiting more often with his kids and "seeing my grandchildren grow up."

"If there's anything that's been the high part of my life, it's been my marriage and children," he stated.

Love your family. Hold your spouse's hand. Do your job well. Honor your Lord.

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That's the Nietopski way.

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