

Coach Mike Waldo is a one-of-a-kind basketball coach

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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Coaches like Edwardsville head boys basketball Mike Waldo don't come along often.

In fact, Waldo now stands in the top 15 on the Illinois High School Association All-Time Basketball Coaching Wins list with 727 wins and only 266 defeats. Waldo finishes at Edwardsville with a 646-215 mark. His team won 10 Southwestern Conference championships, 21 regional titles, seven sectional championships and had five state finals trips.

The impressive coaching legacy Waldo has left in his 30-year Edwardsville run is much more than wins. Waldo is the kind of coach who makes an impact as soon as he takes the court. He is almost always the sharpest-dressed man in the gym with a pressed white shirt, tie, dress pants and shoes. His assistant coaches always follow his lead with the shirt and tie look.

Coach Waldo believes every player, including the last reserve, is important to his team. In post-game press conferences, he always makes it a point to talk of a player or multiple players who may have scored two points, but did 10 other positive things in the win. Coach Waldo understood the media and that is because he started with sports writer ambitions with the St. Louis Suburban Journals.

Coach Waldo and his team were always the best prepared squad when he would step onto the court. He spent hours upon hours watching game films, trying to figure out a way to stifle the next opponent. He worked his players as hard as anyone in practice, but off the court, he has always been there for any of the players who needed help or advice.

A.J. Epenesa, one of Edwardsville High School's greatest athletes, sat down a few years back and told a Waldo story when asked how much the coaches at EHS had meant to him and his development.

A.J. said Coach Matt Martin was with him nearly year-round in football, then as the weights coach for track and field and he said he would forever be thankful for his help. Then, A.J. said the same about Coach Waldo and also said Coach Waldo worked harder than anybody on the floor with his preparation.

A.J. said while Coach Waldo was tough on the court, he always did small, but extremely meaningful things to show he cared about his players.

During his transition from football to basketball, A.J. said he was having a hard time with leg cramps. When he mentioned it to Waldo, the coach, with his own money, provided him with enough Deep Heating Cream for the entire season. For the rest of the year, that Deep Heating Cream was there on the bus and ready for A.J., even when the team traveled. Each Edwardsville player probably has a Coach Waldo story that means something special to them.

Coach Waldo taught special education through his teaching tenure. I can only imagine the impact he has had on all those lives and families.

What I admired most about Coach Waldo wasn't how he coached the team, but how he loved his wife, his children and entire family. A few years back, he told me as much in those words how much he appreciated all their sacrifices over the years.

"I think being able to coach for a long time, a lot of credit there goes to my wife, because we worked hard at it," he said. "Our coaching staff and our players spend a lot of time practicing basketball and getting ready to play. I have spent a lot of time coaching and away from home. My wife has always taken care of everything at home and was a great mother, wife and a very strong person. She never, ever, made me feel guilty about being gone. I think the fact that we have had a great situation is she has allowed me to do what I had to do. I have never had any pressure to not work hard at it and I owe that to her."

In the end, the coach did not want attention for his accomplishments.

Rather than talk about himself, at his last press event he chose to talk about his players and how hard they have worked to achieve on- and off-court success.

“I’ll tell you – those guys have worked hard,” Waldo said with much emphasis that night after losing to Belleville West in the regional championship. “We have been demanding of these guys. And they have worked hard every day, and they just come back for more. And that’s the reason they got better. And I think this is such a good bunch of guys, and I think these guys have achieved so much, with their work ethic and their skill, and the fact they’re such good guys.”

Coach Waldo had an impact on every player he coached, from starters to reserves.

I don’t know if this was ever more apparent than after his last game. As the game ended, some players lined the sideline to shake his hand and congratulate him on his long tenure. One of those players quickly recognized was Mark Smith, last year’s Mr. Basketball, but there were several played smaller team roles who also were waiting for the coach. Some of those weren’t starters, but reserves in his program. Those reserves wanted to shake his hand as much as the starters, which I found very touching.

EHS Principal Dennis Cramsey appropriately summed up what Coach Waldo has meant to Edwardsville School District 7 with the following words when he was recognized on Senior Night:

“I consider Coach Waldo the best basketball coach in the state of Illinois,” he said. While Cramsey said this, the EHS student body chanted: “We want Waldo, We want Waldo.”

“I also consider coach (Waldo) a friend,” Cramsey continued. “Thank you coach for all you have done for the boys. We present this plaque to you for your dedication. Your commitment to basketball and the boys has earned the highest esteem from us.”

It seemed there was a full gymnasium of people who felt the same way as Cramsey and none seemed ready for him to leave the school as coach.



