

Coaching legend dies

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Former Grainger, Kinston High School coach Paul Jones succumbs to lung disease

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Paul Jones, one of the greatest high school basketball coaches in the history of the state, passed away Thursday morning at his son's home in Fayetteville. He was 76.

Jones' basketball teams at Grainger High School and Kinston High School were 662-274 in 38 years. His Red Devil and Viking squads won 18 conference championships, two North Carolina High School Athletic Association titles in 1964 and 1965 and four runners-up finishes.

Forty-two of Jones' players went on to play college basketball, while three - Jerry Stackhouse, Cedric Maxwell and Charles Shackleford - played in the National Basketball Association.

"Paul Jones was one of the finest basketball coaches the state of North Carolina has ever produced," NCHSAA Executive Director Charlie Adams said. "But more importantly, he was a gentleman, a wonderful person and a long-time friend."

NCHSAA Associate Executive Director Rick Strunk concurred with Adams, who inducted Jones into the NCHSAA Hall of Fame in 2000.

"If you ask anyone from across the state to list the top all-time coaches in North Carolina, his name will pop up in the conversation," Strunk said. "History will reflect that he was one of the greatest coaches our state ever produced."

Stackhouse, who is playing for the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, said Jones' death impacts the whole state.

"It's a big loss to our community and a big loss to high school basketball in general," Stackhouse said. "He meant a lot to the high school game in North Carolina."

Like Stackhouse, Webb Tyndall not only played for Jones, he also played at the University of North Carolina for Dean Smith, who retired as the NCAA's all-time winningest coach (which, like Jones in the NCHSAA ranks, has since been surpassed).

Tyndall, a corporate communications officer at the little bank, said Jones and Smith were similar in nature.

"To be able to play for him and then go play for Coach Smith, it was a huge honor," Tyndall said. "They are both tremendous men."

Jones took over the reins of an already-successful Red Devil basketball program in 1957 from Amos Sexton, who had led Grainger to state championships.

But he also became the head baseball coach, taking over the program from Frank Mock. He led the Red Devils to a sterling 184-88 mark, including a state championship in 1968 and one state runner-up finish, along with six conference championships. His combined record as a basketball and baseball coach was 846-362.

George Whitfield, one of the nation's all-time best prep and American Legion baseball coaches, got his start as an

educator when he was a student teacher alongside Jones in 1958. He said what Jones accomplished was a great feat.

"To come in and follow two legends, the way he did, it's not an easy thing to do," Whitfield said. "But Paul came in and did a wonderful job and continued their great work."

In an era of coaches who could be loud and sometimes obnoxious, Jones' quiet and gentlemanly nature was the exception. He was admired by his players, opponents and referees alike.

"He wasn't a shouter and he wasn't very loud, but he was one of the most competitive people I've ever been around," said Wilson County Schools Assistant Superintendent Craig Hill, who was an assistant coach for Jones for 13 years before becoming the KHS head coach. "He wanted to win and he enjoyed being successful. He understood that if you took care of the details and if you prepared the way you should before a contest, you'd be all right."

Tommy Mattocks was one of Jones' first players at Grainger. After Mattocks became a renowned basketball official, he said he once asked Jones why he didn't get up and "scream and holler" like the other coaches.

"He told me that he thought the best coaching was done in practice," Mattocks said. "He didn't need to get up and scream at his players. If he said something, you knew you needed to listen."

When Jones' coaching contract was not renewed by the Lenoir County School Board in 1995, he left the game as the winningest prep basketball coach in North Carolina. He still is in the top five with his 662 wins.