

Bruce Woitas reflects on 35 years in Tomahawk

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SLEEPY EYE - A head coach doesn't get to the top of a career wins list without making sacrifices.

Sleepy Eye St. Mary's girls basketball head coach Bruce Woitas, who holds the most wins for a coach in Tomahawk Conference girls basketball history, knows this quite well.

Over his 35 seasons as the Knights' girls basketball head coach, Woitas has more than earned that bragging right. But he's also well aware he wouldn't be at the top of that wins list without dedicated players and a supportive family.

"I've been very fortunate," Woitas said. "For me, I've been at Sleepy Eye St. Mary's, those 35 years and that process and that growing and all the different teams. It kind of makes it a little bit special. I hit the 500 wins here, I think it was last year at some point, the school kind of made a big deal out of it, but to me it was just teams going out and doing what they love to do, playing the game and I'm just a small piece of that. It's the kids that put all that work in and time in to make that happen. But realistically, to have something like that means you've been around a while.

"I've been very fortunate to have this opportunity and very supportive family and wife. Some of these years, as a coach, you sacrifice quite a bit, too. I had three sons playing boys basketball, I was coaching girls basketball, so you missed a lot of their stuff. That's difficult to do and tough to do. I know their senior years, most schools were very accommodating that we schedule quite a few games on separate nights and you still get to their games, but you make a big sacrifice that way, too."

Woitas, a Minnesota State University grad, has amassed 340 wins in the conference, five conference titles and has a current overall career coaching record of 531-360.

But as is the case for many coaches, the wins didn't come right away either. Woitas's first season coaching varsity at St. Mary's came during the 1989-90 season.

And it came with some growing pains.

"That was a tough year , we didn't win a game that year, we went 0-19," Woitas said. "So it was a tough year. If you look back, St. Marys' first year having girls basketball was in 77-78 and they were 0-6, that first year they played six games. And up through from 77-78 through 88-89, they had zero winning seasons.

"Our first winning record season was in 93-94 when we finished 13-9. Then we pretty much stayed consistently above the .500 mark pretty much all the way, there were a couple years where we fell below that, but other than that, we've always been right around .500 or above from that 93-94 on."

Woitas, who is also the Sleepy Eye St. Mary's Athletic Director, had made it to the state tournament with three entirely different teams during his time at St. Mary's, the first coming during the 1998-99 season. The Knights ended up taking on Red Rock Central in a first-round matchup at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter.

The game wasn't pretty for the Knights as RRC rolled to a 70-24 win, but the journey to get to that state tournament was a highlight for St. Mary's as it was the school's first girls basketball team to make it to a state tournament.

Woitas said that tournament was a buildup from the 1993-94 season when the team went 13-9. After that, the Knights increased their win total each season until they went 21-6 during that 1998-99 season.

"It was just kind of building up from that," Woitas said. "Kids really took ownership in what we were trying to do in the program and it was nice to have that. They work hard. It's just kind of that whole culture that got created just kind of continued through to what we're still doing today."

From that 1998-99 team, the Knights saw Rachel Braun, Kit Neubauer and Sharisse Heiderscheidt all named unanimous All-Conference players, while Naomi Walter was an Honorable Mention.

Current Knights girls basketball assistant head coach Ashley Schieffert, née Mathiowetz, was also on that first state tournament team as a freshman. Schieffert is also the aunt of Knights freshman starter Morgan Mathiowetz and Morgan's older sister Madison Mathiowetz, the school's all-time leading scorer and current member of the South Dakota State University women's basketball team. Ashley Schieffert's eighth-grade daughter Olivia Schieffert is also a current member of the Knights girls basketball varsity team.

"There's a number of parents now that have their daughter playing that I coached them, I get that a lot," Woitas said. "Obviously the Mathiowetz family have gone through. I coached Brynn, that would be Madison and Morgan's mom, she was actually on that 04-05 team where we played at Williams Arena, she was on that team. Just been a lot. Allie Labat, who graduated last year, I coached her mom, Tina. So it's been a lot, it's kind of neat to see that, too. Starting to coach, some of the first kids that you coached that stuck in the area, you're coaching their kids. ... Or maybe a grandparent's granddaughter now, they had their daughter play and now you're coaching their granddaughter."

Ashley Schieffert's younger sister Molly was also a part of St. Marys' second state tournament team in 2005 with Brynn Mathiowetz, née Braulick. Molly Mathiowetz ended up finishing her career as a two-time Tomahawk All-Conference Girls Basketball Player of the Year.

Molly Mathiowetz was an All-Conference player and was also the conference's Player of the Year during that 2004-05 state season as a sophomore. Maria Gangelhoff was another Knights player on the All-Conference team that season, while Liza Schwartz was an Honorable Mention.

That 2005 state tourney run ended with a 51-38 loss to Fosston at Williams Arena.

Jumping ahead to 2008, Woitas got to coach his own family as his daughter, Allison, played on the varsity team from 2008-12.

While the Knights saw some success after their 2005 state tourney run, the journey to get back to state took time. But the wait paid off as the Knights got back to the state tourney in 2021 during Madison Mathiowetz's junior year.

But with COVID-19 restrictions still in place, it made the season challenging and altered the tournament.

"It's just a credit to our kids," Woitas said. "Obviously nobody wanted that, but we still got to actually play the game of basketball, we had a lot of restrictions. It was probably a lot more work as an AD than it was as a coach because all of the sudden you had limitations, too, and based on the size of your gym, who could attend home games that year, but they accomplished a great deal."

The Knights opened the 2021 state tournament with a game against Mayer Lutheran at Mankato East High School on March 31, 2021. The Knights won that game 78-67 to move on to a semifinals game against Belgrade-Broten-Elrosa at the Target Center on April 6, 2021.

In the win over Mayer Lutheran, Madison Mathiowetz led the way with 44 points and 18 rebounds, while senior Sydney Windschitl added 19 points and 10 rebounds and junior Reagan Severson had 7 points.

BBE ended the Knights' state run that year, which didn't include a consolation bracket or third-place game, with a 51-50 win.

While Woitas has coached several great players and had many great moments, that 2021 state run is still fresh in his mind as a highlight.

"The state quarterfinal game during the COVID year where we played Mayer Lutheran, who was a very talented team, at Mankato East, I don't think we were expected to beat them and we played really well and got that win," Woitas said. "And then had the opportunity to go up to the cities and play at Target Center. I would say that's probably one that sticks out the most of recent, but there's a lot of .

"I sit a long time and reflect because there's been a lot of good teams, lot of good players, lot of ups and downs or whatever, but a lot of positive things through those 35 years, which is kind of special."

Madison Mathiowetz finished her prep career in 2022 as a four-time Tomahawk All-Conference Girls Basketball Player of the Year.

During his time as head coach, Woitas has coached a dozen 1,000-career-point scorers. Natalie Fischer, a current sophomore varsity starter, is closing in on being the 13th player as she is 46 points away from hitting the 1,000-point mark.

There are no seniors on the team this season, with the oldest player being junior Amelia Schwartz. There are just three sophomores and the rest of the team is made up of freshmen and eighth-graders, but the Knights still boast a 20-7 record this season despite all of that youth.

Morgan Mathiowetz is just one of the Knights' young players this year with state dreams. Earlier this season, she duplicated her big sister Madison's accomplishment of passing 1,000 career points during her freshman year.

So what will the future of St. Mary's girls basketball look like?

"I think very bright," Woitas said. "This year we have no seniors, only one junior, three sophomores, we're starting three freshmen, a sophomore and a junior. All of those kids have a great desire to learn the game of basketball, they put in the extra time, they're just going to be a very fun group to watch. If they can stay at it and continue to work hard and want to continue to improve at their game of basketball, they'll be a fun group to watch over the next few years.

"Very fortunate to have that and just to have that desire and passion and drive to get better at the game. They've been a fun group to coach for a young group, like I said, but they've been an awesome group to coach. They come to practice every day and want to get better and that's what you take pride in as a coach when they can walk in the door and they just want to get at it and get going."