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Article published Sunday, July 22, 2007
IN THEIR WORDS: RAY LAUWERS

Still going strong at Monroe SMCC Falcon coach has fifth-best record in Michigan history

By STEVE JUNGA
BLADE SPORTS
WRITER



In Their Words is a weekly feature in The Blade's sports section. Blade sports writer Steve Junga talked with Ray Lauwers, longtime teacher and coach at Monroe St. Mary Catholic Central High School.

Ray Lauwers figured out fairly early in his life that his calling was to be a teacher and a coach.

One thing the veteran Monroe St. Mary Catholic Central basketball coach never really considered was when to stop.

As he approaches his 47th year on the job, the 41st at SMCC, he still isn't sure.

Entering 2007-08, Lauwers has a 587-287 record coaching the Falcons' varsity basketball team, which ranks him fifth on the Michigan prep career list. Although records are sketchy from the four seasons (1963-67) he spent coaching at the former Detroit Annunciation High School, 17 additional wins have been verified, which would put Lauwers at 604. He prefers, however, not to count these.

Truth told, he would prefer people not make a big deal about his wins or losses. Lauwers says he is more grateful for than proud of the record, insisting his greatest reward has come from the time spent with his students in the classroom and on the court.

Born to parents Ray and Elizabeth in Detroit, Lauwers was the oldest of five siblings. His father, a talented pitcher, was offered a professional baseball contract by the Detroit Tigers at age 17, but opted not to join the minor-league affiliate in Beaumont, Texas.

The younger Ray grew up following sports, but lacked the talent to excel at them. He was cut from the freshman and junior varsity basketball teams his first two years at the former Sacred Heart High School in Detroit, then was cut from the varsity as a

Ray Lauwers coaches on the court that bears his name. He has a record of 587-287 in 41 years at Monroe St. Mary.
(THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER)

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junior.

When he finally earned a starting spot as a senior, by Lauwers' own admission, making the team had less to do with his improvement as the team's lack of talent. "The truth of the matter was, my coach told me 'If the other teams were smart they'd let you shoot,' " he said.

These humble beginnings as a player failed to deter Lauwers' growing desire to become a coach. An English and philosophy major, he earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Detroit in 1961. He had already taken a job as a football assistant at St. Gertrude's as a college senior, and began as a teacher there the following fall.

He has taught a variety of subjects at Monroe SMCC over the years, most recently religion. He is certain his students have taught him as much in return over the years.

Lauwers' wife of 40 years, Pat, died last September from complications of her combination of Lupus and Raynaud's disease. He has three grown children - daughter Joanne and sons Ray and Michael. He had the opportunity to coach all three.

Lauwers' top season with the Falcons was a 22-2 mark in 2001-02, the most recent of his seven 20-win seasons. In all, SMCC has had winning records in 34 of Lauwers' 40 seasons.

This summer he was one of eight finalists for the national coach of the year award presented by the National High School Coaches Association.

He has no immediate plans to stop teaching or coaching.

"THE THING that has been relevant to everything I've done is my dad's example. My dad never missed a day of work, and was never late. I can't say I'm that good at that, but because of the way he was I never had a job where, when I left, they didn't tell me 'You can come back anytime you want.' That's part of my sense of responsibility to be a good employee and do what I do as well as I can.

"I HAD THIS urge to be a coach early on. When I was in high school I started a little league [baseball] team in the area. We didn't even have a little league, but I started a team, got a bunch of the neighborhood kids together and coached them. I tried to find a place for them to play. I knew, for a good part of my life, that one of my major options was to be a teacher and a coach.

"IF I WERE coaching at most any other place I probably would have been out of coaching years ago. There's two reasons I've been able to coach as long as I have - No. 1, because I've had good health, and No. 2 is location. The administration, the parents and the kids have all put up with me when I was being unreasonable or whatever. As a result, I was able to continue. At a lot of other places I probably would have left because I wouldn't have put up with some of the things that some coaches have to put up with. Other places would have gotten rid of me a long time ago. I tend to rub people the wrong way at times and I'm kind of set in my ways.

"AS FAR AS my teaching, they say find something you love and you never have to work a day in your life. That's basically been my experience. I don't even like snow days. I've had so many rewards from the kids, seeing them do what they do with their lives and seeing them face the challenges that they face and overcoming those challenges. I can't put into words how gratifying it's been. I've been here 40 years. It's not a state-of-the-art building, it's not the salary, and I don't socialize much with the faculty. So, there's only one thing left, and that's the kids.

"MY GREATEST influence as a coaching mentor is Bobby Knight. When I started seriously coaching basketball, I knew what I wanted to do but I didn't know how to teach it. Bobby Knight is one of the greatest teachers of the game. He basically taught me [through camps and clinics] how to teach what I use. My philosophy is a lot like his - the team that makes the least mistakes has the best chance to win. As a coach, it's your job to give your kids a chance to win at the end, even if you don't have the greater talent.

"MY BEST COACHING memory is from when my oldest son [Ray] was a junior in high school and we played Southgate Aquinas in the district final. They had Mark Montgomery, who went on to play at Michigan State. We were not expected to win and one of our kids, Doug Lippford, hit a shot at the end of the game and we won. We went into the locker room and celebrated and I went back out and was talking to the radio [interviewer]. While I was there, my son walked up and put his arms around me and we just hugged each other. I've thought so many times, 'How many fathers and sons ever have those moments in which they've worked together and done something and had that kind of moment of satisfaction?' That is my most meaningful memory as a coach.

"MY WIFE WAS someone who never hesitated to tell you exactly what she thought, whether it was good or bad. She could tell you she thought you were useless but, the next day, if you had a problem, she'd be the first person there to help you. She made tremendous sacrifices for me for years. She hardly ever missed any of the kids' games. She worked as a dispatcher at the sheriff's department, and she worked midnights just so she could go to the games. When she passed away, we had a one-day showing and the undertaker estimated that 1,300 people showed up. She just touched so many lives.

"THIS SUMMER I was one of eight finalists for national coach of the year for the national high school coaches association. I went to the convention in Milwaukee. But that didn't mean nearly as much to me as being invited to 30 graduation parties

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this year. Yes, you take pride in all the wins. But I've just kind of stumbled through life and all these good things have happened to me. I can't even figure out why so many things have happened. It's kind of hard to believe.

"When I die I will be satisfied with what I've done in the world if people say 'He cared.'"

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