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HEADLINE: Coaches and parents can be a volatile mix -- To avoid conflicts with parents, Barksdale kept his distance

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THE DANGER of parental meddling always lurked during Dave Barksdale's stint as basketball coach at Woodrow Wilson High School in Beckley.

Barksdale's teams won five state championships in his 17 seasons at Woodrow Wilson, competed for a championship nearly every year and often would attract capacity crowds of 3,500 at the Raleigh County Armory. On game nights, the Armory became the social and entertainment hub for the community of 17,000. Being a starter, or even a valuable reserve, on a Barksdale team meant instant prestige for the player and an opportunity for his parents to bask in their son's reflected glory. The player's parents suddenly became minor celebrities around town, perhaps for the first time in their lives, and they would hear compliments from the basketball-minded townspeople.

Under the circumstances, Barksdale knew that an occasional parent or two might try to exert whatever influence they could muster to help their offspring move up the Flying Eagles' depth chart. And to make the situation a bit more difficult for him, Barksdale is a Beckley native and, in many cases, knew the parents, brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles of his players.

But the coach took precautions. He didn't sanction a boosters club, knowing

that a zealous parent might expect something in return for his or her contributions, and the coach chose his words carefully in the presence of the players' parents.

More than anything, Barksdale wanted his best players on the floor and believed that athletics was one of life's few meritocracies. Merit, he believed, should determine starting positions and playing time and that skin color, religion or a pushy parent's influence, financial or otherwise, should be totally irrelevant.

"I'll tell you my philosophy, and it goes back to Al McGuire, who used to be at Marquette," Barksdale said. "I heard him say one time that his philosophy on parents was that if he saw one coming, he would go the other way."

Barksdale, who now works as an assistant basketball coach at Mountain State University in Beckley, coached at Woodrow Wilson from 1983 through 2000.

"I know how parents are," he said from his office this week. "That's just human nature. Everybody thinks their kid is very good or the best. I just know how it is. I know that people can be real nice to you, but when it came time for their kid to play or make the team, the whole thing can change. I was nice, but I was very distant. Nobody - the superintendent, the principal - said anything to me about so-and-so making the team or playing or whatever. I often said that if I ever played politics, that's when I would get out of coaching."

Pressure on the coach, particularly from parents, is a universal element at all levels of sports. Little League baseball is notorious for ill-mannered parents, and soccer has joined the fray. Although there have been no national studies on the subject, the Youth Sports Research Council of New Jersey believes that negative and even violent behavior by parents is probably no worse

than it's ever been.

Even at the professional level, coaches are not immune to complaints about playing time. Agents sometimes notify general managers that their high-salaried clients are not happy with their playing time and that, if accommodations are not made, the high-salaried clients might make use of their free-agent options.

Barksdale doughnuts

Basketball tryouts at Woodrow Wilson would last a full week and would attract between 70 and 80 prospective players. Barksdale and his assistants tried to give each player a good look before making cuts.

And when it came to the parents of his players, the coach was tactful. "I was cordial to all parents," he said. "But even with people I had known for a long time, when their sons played [for me], it was 'How are you, Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so.' It was pretty much a professional basis. There was no social contact. My wife and I were nice to parents."

Barksdale recognized that boosters clubs serve a worthwhile purpose, but he was fortunate to be in a good situation. His teams made good money at the gate and local benefactors - benefactors who did not ask for anything in return - would pay for charter buses. If no one came forward to pay for a charter bus, the team would take a school bus. After their championship seasons, the city of Beckley would honor the Flying Eagles with parades and banquets.

"I didn't want a boosters club," he said. "I think they do a lot of good, but at the same time it can be the other way around where they feel you owe them something. They can control who you pick or who you play and all that. We just felt it was better to go without a boosters club."

Instead, Barksdale and his coaches would sell doughnuts door-to-door and to

local businesses and would use the money to send their players to AAU tournaments and other summer basketball events.

"We had a lot of people that supported our basketball program. There's no doubt about that," he said. "We had good crowds. The interest was there. We generated revenue through the crowds."

Sometimes, unfortunately, his decisions on player personnel carried difficult consequences.

"I've had to cut people I didn't think should play, and I've lost friends that I was close to at one time because of it," he said. "I've had to cut some sons of very influential members of the community, but I couldn't sleep at night if I didn't do what was right. I tried to be fair to everybody."

Less involvement

Coach Carl Clark's basketball success at Capital High School has approached that of Barksdale. His Cougars have won two state championships and missed a third by a basket during his 15 seasons at the school.

Clark, however, works with a much smaller fan base and less parent involvement. As a result, he says, it's not often a parent pesters him about his or her son's playing time.

"When you don't have a lot a parents involved, you don't have a lot of parents asking you about playing time," said Clark. "The more involvement the parents have and the more work they do, the more they expect of you."

Occasionally, a parent will confront him on the issue, but he patiently explains that playing time is based on ability. "You tell them that playing time is geared to how well they perform," he said, "and you can't justify putting kids in there if they don't perform. You can't coach according to what the

parents want."

Lack of parental involvement is also reflected in the school's basketball boosters club. He estimates that only "four or five" parents help out with the program, mostly working the concession stand to raise meal money for the players' out-of-town trips. He conducts booster-club meetings, but turnout is sparse, he said.

The boosters club at South Charleston High School consisted of at least 30 members when Bryce Casto coached football there from 1987 to 1995. And although many of the boosters were parents of football players, they quickly learned not to talk playing time with Casto.

"I always had a pretty hard-fast rule," Casto recalled. "I would not talk to parents about playing time. I just wouldn't do it. I would talk about how their son could get better, where we saw opportunities for improvement and what the player's standing was with the team, but I wouldn't discuss playing time. I also wouldn't discuss somebody else's child's playing time. That was just a philosophical thing that I did. I never would discuss playing time with parents."

It was inevitable, of course, that a parent occasionally would approach Casto and try to force the issue.

"They tried. Sometimes they would press it," said Casto, who now works as director of student affairs at West Virginia State. "But I never had significant confrontations with parents. There was one or two that I can think of, but overall my experience with parents was very, very good. I had a real good experience with South Charleston parents."

The SC boosters club, he said, was a combination of parents and civic-minded

citizens, and it was a big part of the team's success. It raised money to charter buses, pay for postgame meals on the road, buy blocking sleds and other equipment and even cover the pay for part-time coaches.

"We always looked to the boosters club to cover items we would like to have but weren't covered in the school budget," said Casto. "It varied from year to year as to what we purchased, but they were items that essentially were enhancements to the program. The people were very giving, and the interesting thing is that it's not always the folks who have students in the program but they're just community-oriented. What you always tried to do was find a person with a particular interest and match it with that. They are absolutely critical to the program. With those enhancements, they can make a good program great."