

Hardee Honored Tuesday Night

Written by Mike Kelly
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Watauga High baseball coach Pete Hardee received a prestigious honor before Tuesday night's game against Hickory. Hardee, now in his 17th year as head coach of the Pioneers, had the home dugout at WHS Field named after him by an anonymous donor. It was another worthy achievement for a guy,

who picked up his 300th win last spring at the East Rutherford Easter Tournament in Forest City, N.C. And it was another honor for a guy that's built an impressive resume during his career.

As a coach, Hardee has led the Pioneers to seven regular-season conference championships, three conference tournament titles, the state playoffs ten times, three sectional finals (1999, 2000 and 2011), two sectional titles (1999 and 2000) and the regional finals (1999). He led the Pioneers to the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Tournament championship last season. WHS wiped out an early 5-0 deficit and beat South Caldwell 8-7 in extra innings, snapping the Spartans six-year reign as league champions. But for Hardee being a coach goes way beyond the trophies and the championships.

"For me, it's more about the relationships you build with the players on your team," he said.

"Sure, you want to win. What coach doesn't. But it's not about the wins and losses so much as it is about the players and the people you touch over the years. It's nice to be recognized by the people you work for. I've really been blessed here at Watauga."

Hardee, a native of New Bern, N.C., starred at Appalachian State University, where he earned All-America honor and led the Mountaineers to the NCAA tournament in 1984; he was drafted by the Montreal Expos (now the Washington Nationals) that same season. He is also a member of the New Bern High School and ASU Hall of Fames.

As a coach, he's 322-251 overall; 233-182 with the Pioneers. His first stint with the Pioneers came in 1987 as a student-teacher. He was 8-11 with that team. He was the head coach at West Caldwell from 1991-93, and his 1991 squad, which was 21-3, was nationally ranked by USA Today. He went back to his alma mater, New Bern, for two seasons (1994-95) before he made his way to Boone.

"The program wasn't very good when I got here (in 1995-96)," he said. "There really wasn't a strong work ethic. But this is a hard-working community, so I was confident we'd get it turned around. And we've been blessed with some hard working players over the years, and some very talented players as well, that have been dedicated to put in the time."

And following a 7-12-1 record in his first season as coach (1996), the Pioneers have pretty much been on solid ground ever since.

"we just wanted to instill that we weren't going to use weather as an excuse," he said. I knew when I came here, we weren't always going to be the most talented team in the league and the state. But we built our foundation on the work ethic the people have here in Watauga County, and it's allowed us to be pretty successful."

Larry Moser, Hardee's high school coach, was a big influence in his life. He coached Hardee in baseball and basketball, but left a much bigger impression on his student.

"He was a great coach, and I like the way he just went about his work," Hardee said. "I remember the old pick-up truck he drove to practice and what his gym shoes sounded like at

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basketball practice. And Jim Morris at ASU really was a huge influence as well. Their organizational skills, their communication skills, their dedication and what a building a successful team is all about. Those are some of the things that really got me interested in becoming a coach. And as a coach, you certainly want to win as many games you can, but the key is to make your guys better ball players, but better men down the road."

And Hardee has been blessed with his share of talented players. Jon Greene (Western Carolina and the Texas Rangers organization), Jacob Chaney (UNC-Charlotte and Virginia Tech), Cal Hurst (The Citadel), Matt Johnson (UNCC), Jake Watts (Milligan College), just to name a few, were impact players for Hardee over the years.

"They were classy guys and great players," he said. "But that's just scratching the surface. I've had a lot of great players over the years. And some of those guys are still playing baseball. And some of them have moved on with their lives to do other things. But what counts the most are the memories. Getting to know those players, and playing a role in their lives is something special for me. It's been a great experience."

And I'm sure the feelings are mutual, coach.