

Payne Honored Friday Night

Written by Mike Kelly

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Ashe County High Athletic Director Marc Payne has to be the most decorated man in the state of North Carolina. The Ashe County native was recognized by 50 or more of his former players and coaches between games of Friday night's double-header between Watauga and the Huskies in West Jefferson, N.C.

Payne was presented a plaque for his 38 years of service as a basketball coach. He won 574 games in his brilliant career. But it goes beyond the wins, the conference championships, and the plethora of awards he's achieved. No, it's more about the young men he influenced during that stretch.

I know he's influenced me, and I never played for him. But I was blessed to see both his 300th and 400th career wins, with the last one coming at Ashe County in his final season as head coach of the Pioneers in 2001-02.

"He was a good hire, that's for sure," said former WHS football coach and Athletic Director Jack Groce. "Marc is such a dedicated educator. He did a wonderful job at Watauga during his stay. But Ashe County kept pursuing him, and they finally got him. Their gain was Watauga's loss."

Payne left WHS in May of 2002. I can still remember him telling me that he was tired of coaching following the 2000-01 season. He was actually ready to hand over the reigns to one of his assistants. He just needed a change, and he got it.

It's like I told him at the time, 'anyone can be replaced, but it all comes down to performance.' Like I said, "Do they raise the bar you left behind another notch, or do they slip and drop off?" And for a while, WHS did struggle.

In the meantime, Payne, like many great coaches, got a new start with his move to West Jefferson. And in the process, he built a powerhouse program with the Huskies. He also had the honor of coaching two all-state players in Tommy Spagnolo (now at Appalachian State) and Zeb Richardson (a sophomore at Guilford College in Greensboro). And he led the Huskies to regionals in 2009.

But think of all the other players, who went on to bigger and better things outside the sports arena. Jake Orr, who backboned WHS to a Northwestern 4A Conference championship in 1998-99 and was named the Player of the Year, is now a lawyer. The gentleman, who presented the plaque to Payne on Friday night, Dr. Sam Misher, is now a principal at Northern Guilford Middle School in Greensboro.

Misher was Payne's point guard on Beaver Creek's 1977-78 team that finished third in the state that season.

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"Sam was a senior on that team," Payne said. "In those days, they took the eight district winners and we played in a tournament. That year, we played some very good teams and lost to Wake Forest-Rolesville in the semifinals. Rolesville was the Class 3A champion the year before, but they dropped down a classification with realignment that season. But I've coached a lot of players that have gone on to do great things. I've really been blessed. Give all the credit for what happened tonight to coach (Scott) Grubb. He put this together. I didn't know anything about it until I saw a lot of my former players start showing up."

"I meant to do this last year," said Grubb, who succeeded Payne at Ashe County. "I really wanted to do it last year, but with the sudden change, and getting pushed into the varsity coaching position, it was just a whirl wind and there just wasn't time. This year, I contacted (WHS coach) Rob (Sanders) in September to start locating some of his former players. I've had a lot of help. A lot of the former players networked out. Coach has meant so much to me. That's why I'm a coach. He's my mentor, he's still my coach."

Payne, the all-time winningest coach at Ashe County, spent 14 years at Beaver Creek before he moved to WHS in 1989-90. Grubb played on Payne's final team at Beaver Creek in 1988-89. They lost to East Montgomery (which lost to North Duplin in the state finals that year) in the sectional semifinals that season.

And during his stay with the Pioneers, Payne won 182 games (good for No.2 in all-time wins at WHS behind the late Carter Lentz, who had 198 wins), and I was blessed to be a part of 89 of those wins. Sanders, who began his coaching career during Payne's tenure, is currently third on that list with 127 wins.

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for coach Payne," said Sanders, who was among those in attendance honoring his former coach Friday night. "I got into this game at the middle school level, when I was still in college (at ASU). And I was fortunate enough that he allowed me to attend his practices, picking up as much as I could to feed it into the middle school system. I got the chance to coach at the freshman and junior varsity levels. I told him during the ceremony, 'that I will never forget what he's done for me and the opportunity he gave me.'

"I tell him every year, 'I wouldn't be here without you.' It was something special to see all those people out there to show their love for him. But it's a small fraction of those he's influenced over the years."

A heart attack in May of 2012 forced him out of the coaching ranks, but the memories of what he's accomplished remain. And Friday night's ceremony represents just a small fraction to all of us that have come to know him over the years. Thanks coach Payne, You Da Man!

Photo Courtesy: Marc Payne, Ashe County Athletics