

## For coaching legend Jim Stoeckel, it's all about the kids



Jim Stoeckel has won 731 games and six Essex County Grammar School League titles with St. Thomas the Apostle. (*Aristide Economopoulos/The Star-Ledger*)

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It starts today, when they turn college basketball's best loose in search of the other side of the rainbow. Every dribbler and dunker and jump shooter among them will fan out across the face of the continental landmass in search of glory. Every elite coach among them will play for country, college and a bank account to rival the national budget of Samoa. And every high roller and low roller from here to Vegas and back will remain true to the quasi-religious principle that it matters not if they win or lose but whether they cover the point spread.

Coach Mike Kryzyewski of Duke, who earns \$7.2 million a year, is going. Coach Billy Donovan of Florida, who earns \$3.7 million, is going. Coach Tom Izzo, who earns \$3.4 million, is going. All America awaits them.

But nobody is waiting for coach Jim Stoeckel, who in 37 years has never earned a cent for coaching and whose basketball world is several planets to the left of theirs. He is the coach Nike forgot. Forgot? Hell, he is the coach Nike never knew.

He is 71 now and he's only won 731 games and six Essex County Grammar School League titles, but he hopes to improve.

The fact that he does not have a 6-foot-7 center is not surprising. The kids he coaches are only 12 and 13 years old.

So this is the story of the King of Basketball Lilliput, the coach who played some in the Army and suddenly became a full-fledged coach in a single instant when his wife, Florence, who then coached the girls team, volunteered him to coach the boys at St. Thomas the Apostle Grammar School in Bloomfield.

"My boy, James III, was only 3 years old back then," he will tell you, "and I figured I'd stay just long enough to be able to coach my son, and then quit."

Since then he retired as a bread delivery man when the company was sold in 1998, still worked as a successful high school and college referee, an assigner of high school officials (a position he still holds) and the winningest coach in the history of his league.

At this point, it is worth a word or two about the Stoeckel family history.

Florence Stoeckel, his wife, coached girls basketball at St. Thomas the Apostle and later at Glen Ridge High School, and after she retired she kept the scorebook for her husband until she died two years ago. Lisa, the oldest daughter, played for her mother at both schools, went on to become a 1,000-point scorer at Upsala College and now coaches her father's two grandsons at Saint Pius Elementary in Montville.

Her brother, James III, who played for his dad, is now the coach at Belleville High School. His sister, Luann, played for her mother. A son-in-law, Billy, is a referee.

There are those in the Stoeckel family who will tell you that somewhere among their ancestors a rare gene broke loose and began to dribble a basketball up and down the family tree. From that moment forward this became a clan that marched to the sound of a distant dribbler. The thump ... thump ... thump ... of ball against court beat out their cadence. The sweet swish of ball through net became their clarion call.

One suspects that at family barbecues you can't throw a basketball without hitting another basketball player or coach in the head.

Joan Ferraer, the principal at St. Thomas the Apostle, once coached girls basketball at Sacred Heart and lost to Florence. That was about 37 years ago.

She says of Stoeckel, "You could say he is an institution around here. If one of his players is headed for academic trouble, all I have to do is let him know. They are more afraid of not being part of the team than anything else, and he gets them to pull the grades up."

"Sometimes, I go down to the gym and watch practice just to see him work. He is such a marvelous teacher."

The first day he walked into practice, and 24 young faces were looking up at him. He wondered what to do next. Then his daughter saved him.

"They went to school with her, so when they looked at me, they didn't see a guy trying to figure out how to be a coach. What they saw was Lisa's father," he said. "We did all right, but then I started to think about why we weren't doing better. I remember I came to practice about halfway through the season and watched them shoot around and I thought these kids only get phys ed once a week. Some of them are a little fat. I am going to run them. We became the team that wins a lot of games in the fourth quarter. We still run today.

"I never dealt with Xs and Os. I just taught them how to play man, how to play zone, how to find the open man and how to have fun."

Each year before the candidates report, Jim Stoeckel calls a parents' meeting. This is what he tells them: We are going to have fun. We are going to outwork the other teams so we will win. But most important of all, I am going to help these young men learn responsibility. If they are going to be late for practice or even miss one and I don't get a call, they don't play the next game. And that call has to come from them. Not from Mom ... not from Dad ... from them. If they break a hand, he says, they can dial with the other one."

This is the way he coaches:

The first time I saw him was seven years ago. He was standing behind a shooter, who was concentrating on flair instead of mechanics. The kid was named Mikal Corbitt. He bounced the ball eight times. He held it in both hands and swung it, first left then right, then shot, and missed.

Stoeckel grabbed his hands, then he said "take a breath, then shoot." The ball went in.

As it fell, both Stoeckel and the kid laughed, and then the coach summed up his entire philosophy in a single sentence: "You see, it's really a very simple game."

This year he ripped through his league undefeated.

"Each year I think about quitting and then I say, well, just one more because the truth is, I really, really love these kids."

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