

Final Four Preview

Perfect *match*

After 50 years, Bradleys show they have a love that lasts

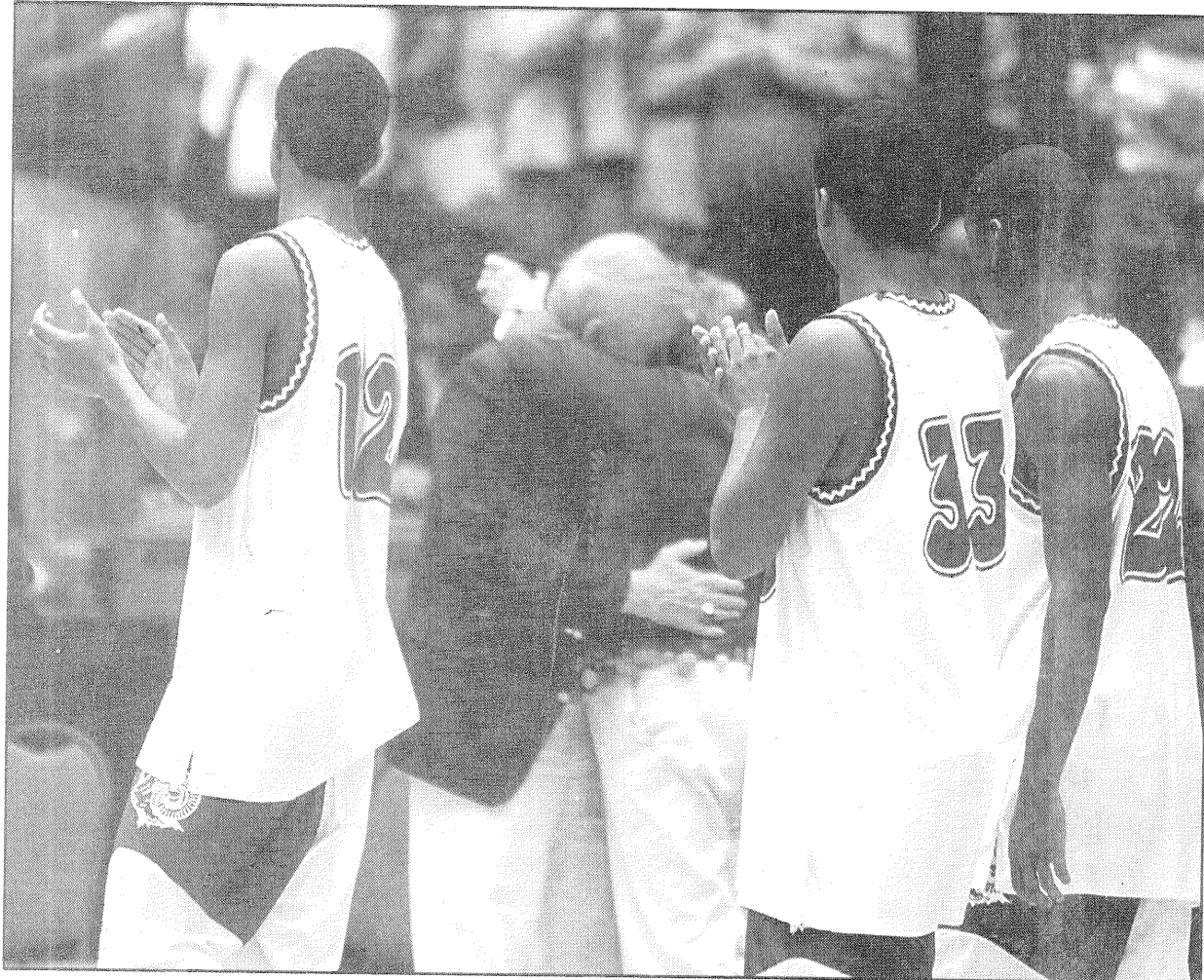
Nat Harwell

The Covington News

Her daddy's birth certificate said he was born in a place known as "I.T.," which stood for "Indian Territory." She'd never seen a basketball, let alone a basketball game. But Jan Thomas, of what is now called Oklahoma, knew her baseball. As a child, she'd listen to her beloved St. Louis Cardinals on the radio while sitting at a typewriter, pounding the keys as if she were writing accounts of the games.

The family moved to Avondale, a place she'd never heard of before, and a young man named Ronald Bradley, who lived across the tracks in the mill town of Scottsdale, caught a glimpse of her going to a movie one day. It was as close to love at first sight as it gets. They had their first date two days before he turned 16, for the homecoming game.

"We kissed for the first time," coach Bradley recalled, "and she told me right then that she loved me. And now, after all these years, I respect her so much. Even now she counsels me every once in a



Magic moment: Jan and Ron Bradley embrace following his 4,000th career point.

Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Bradleys: Writing next chapter in love affair

From page 2B

"I told her Dr. Callaway had walked out twice and handed me babies," Ron recalled, "and I wanted to see if he was ever going to stop."

Memories abound

Over the more than 50 years that Ronald and Jan have shared, there have been many truly memorable moments. He has been enshrined in the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame, has been lauded as national coach of the year by the National High School Coaches Association, has had proclamations awarded by the state legislature and has recorded over 1,300 coaching victories, to name just a few.

But his wife, when asked to

recount the most memorable, picked two instances that still stand out in her heart as most special.

"Back in the early days at Newton, whenever the team returned from a victory out of town, hundreds of fans would gather on the town square to greet them," she recalled. "Those were special times, of course, and the night we won the state title, there were just hundreds of people on the Square and all around."

She pauses and then continues.

"But the thing I remember most was the next year, when we'd lost a heartbreaker in the state play-offs," she said. "We came back to town, and those hundreds of fans were right there on the Square, waiting to welcome us home. I'll never forget that."

As for the coach himself, the memories are almost too thick to pick out just a few. But he did have this to share.

"Our twin boys are named for two of my most valuable players — Bob Mitchell and Billy Shaw," he said. "And it's important for folks to know that a young man named Billy Dean Rutledge wore number 13 for me, and after his death I retired that number. Nobody else will ever wear 13 out of respect for Billy Dean."

The next chapter

This year's Newton High School boys' basketball team has provided the couple with yet another set of memories. Underdogs most of the year, not expected to do much, the undersized Rams, with world-class

heart and desire, have exceeded all expectations and then some, becoming the first Newton team to reach the Final Four since 1981.

Not too long ago, North Carolina's Dean Smith was introduced to Ron Bradley and said, "It sure is great to meet a real live legend."

Jan countered with, "I thought that was our line."

Tomorrow night, the real legend that is Ronald Bradley will have to call on all the things he's learned on that long road from Scottdale, which led him through Athens to Covington. And seated not far from him, having traveled an even longer road from Indian Territory to this year's Final Four, Jan Thomas Bradley will record the next chapter in a legendary love affair.