



Photos by LOUIE FAVORITE / lfavorite@ajc.com

Ron and Jan Bradley, high school sweethearts, have made quite a life together. Jan has witnessed all but five of the 1,756 basketball games Ron has coached, plus hundreds of football and baseball games.

Still courting (after all these years)

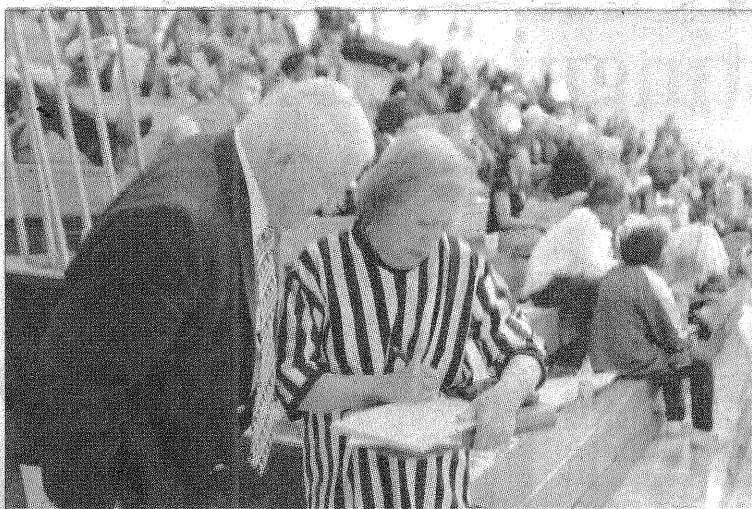
Heritage High coach Ron Bradley and his wife, Jan, married since 1954, put the 'we' in team.

By STEVE HUMMER
steve@ajc.com

Ron Bradley is the model of an old-school coach, his career carbon dating to the days when players ran the ol' picket fence and their shorts didn't flap in the breeze.

Here is the 74-year-old basketball fundamentalist at Heritage High in Conyers who still buttons up his young Patriots in blazers and ties for road games. And if you don't think he can melt the rafters with his ire anymore, go ahead and heave a careless pass or selfish shot.

But get Bradley talking about the girl he met 60 years ago — "The first time I saw her, my heart did flip-flops" — and this ESPN Classic kind of guy goes all Lifetime Network. Turns as soft as rising dough.



Ron checks out Jan's work as the official scorekeeper. "I boo her when she wears that," he jokes of the referee's striped shirt.

► Please see LOVE, C5

Love: Coaching caravan has taken Bradleys on a journey

► Continued from C1

Don't get lost amid the numbers and the trophies, because you easily could.

No, "This is a love story," Bradley insists. The perfect kind of story to frame in a Valentine's Day card.

As Bradley approaches the end of his 48th season of coaching boys high school basketball, each victory only piles onto a total (1,010) already surpassing any other active coach in the United States. He could lose every game for 25 more years and still have a career record above .500.

He owns three state championships — all during glory days at Newton County High, where he won 129 straight home games. He has another one in football, and found two of his baseball teams and one of his girls' basketball teams in state finals. You name it, he's coached it since beginning in 1957.

But it was boys basketball that kept calling Bradley back, eventually earning him two national coach of the year awards and a little corner of the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame.

Life partner

But where would he be without Jan, his wife since 1954? Certainly not still standing at the end of a bench-full of teenagers bearing all this history, Bradley insists.

She has been there for all but five of the 1,756 boys and girls basketball games he has coached, as well as hundreds of other football and baseball games on his record. She is the faithful witness to every

highlight, and ultimately, the coach says, the reason for each one.

"It's always 'we' when he talks about any of those accomplishments," said Darrell Huckaby, a one-time manager on Bradley's Newton County team, now a teacher at Heritage. "For a lot of those years, it was just the two of them; he didn't have an assistant coach."

Tuesday was the final regular-season home game for Heritage, a benchmark for the senior players but just one among hundreds of nights in the gym for Jan Bradley. A small woman dressed in a large referee's striped shirt — "I boo her when she wears that," Ron jokes — Jan took her usual position at the mid-court scorer's table ready to chart every point and foul. Pssst: The coach sleeps with the official scorekeeper — and has for decades.

Typically, the two of them will spend Valentine's Day next Saturday night inside a gym. This time, they'll be in romantic Winder as 17-7 Heritage begins play in the regionals.

"That's how I've spent a lot of Valentine's Days," Jan said, with no tinge of regret.

"A lot of times, my dad's name has been out front and my mom's name in the back, but Dad has always done a pretty good job of trying to bring her up to the front," said Bob Bradley, an assistant principal at Heritage High. "And she's never looked at it like she has taken a back seat to him. She's always felt she was beside him."

It's not as if Bradley just awoke one day and he had all these victories in the bank,



LOUIE FAVORITE / lfavorite@ajc.com

Ron Bradley coaches his Heritage High boys basketball team while his wife, **Jan**, observes. Bradley has 1,010 career victories.

and all those plaques, pictures and tributes that practically bow his office walls.

Such a career reveals itself slowly, one game day, one laundry load of uniforms, one postseason banquet at a time. Many of those details have fallen to Jan.

The coach's wife has to be strong and committed. No one knows this better than

"That's how I've spent a lot of Valentine's Days."

JAN BRADLEY on their life together at the gym

the Bradleys. Yes, their marriage has prevailed, the two of them inseparable. In Colorado, another son, Bill, a high school girls' coach, currently is going through a divorce.

"That is what has kept them both going for so long, the fact they've got each other," Bill said.

"She sets the bar awfully high," said Kelli DeMott, the 28-year-old fiancée of Bradley's young assistant coach, Drew Williams. Frankly, she wonders if she can con-

sistently jump that high. "They've incorporated a love of basketball into everything else in their lives."

There might have been a time when Jan was resentful of all the time her husband spent with other people's children. That ended the day in 1959, when, during the funeral for a player who had drowned, she leaned over to

her husband and whispered, "I'll never complain again about the time you spend with your players."

"I figured out early if we were going to be a family, if we were going to see Dad, we had to spend a lot of time in the gym," Jan said. "It has really paid off. It has been a great life."

As well as raising four children, another of Jan's jobs has been that of curator of the Bradley collection. This she has done scru-

pulously, compiling volume after volume of clippings and photos of their life together. Each season, she has collected the stats and newspaper accounts of the year, bound them and given copies to every player.

Documenting history

Her personal albums date back to the couples' beginnings, when Ron was an emerging sophomore multi-sports star at Avondale High and she had just moved to DeKalb County from Oklahoma. Jan wasn't at her new school more than a couple of months before she and Ron were an item.

"I fell in love with him and basketball — football, too. I watched him in anything he did. I fell in love with it," Jan said.

By his sophomore year at Georgia, where Ron was a baseball/basketball player, the two were married. They had their first child, Brenda, while still at UGA.

His coaching caravan would stop at 8 different schools in Georgia and Florida. His longest, most successful run was at Newton County High (18 years altogether).

Once, for two years after the kids were grown, he took a sabbatical from coaching, allowing the couple to travel and see the world. There would be four aborted retirements along the way, each time some other school coming to him with an offer he couldn't refuse.

Even if coming back meant actually living at the gym for a couple of months during one stop in Dublin, Ga., it was a happy accommodation.

"It wasn't that bad. We could leave the game and be home in a minute," Jan said.

Longer than either one of them could have imagined, they've stayed with the game. His latest gig at Heritage could, just possibly, stretch into a third season. Bradley kind of likes the sound of coaching into 2010, tacking a seventh coaching decade onto his résumé.

It has not been all wins and giggles. Thirty years ago, Bradley nearly was wiped out financially investing in commodities. Money problems can rend any marriage. But Jan supported her husband through a period he called the worst two years of his life, repeatedly telling him the money was not the foundation of their relationship.

Here goes the old coach, getting all gooey again:

"I can't imagine a life without Jan. During the hard times in life, Jan has always been strong. I realized then, she's probably stronger than I am.

"She has been mom to four children, been the steady one. When I get lost and won't admit it, she helps me find my way."

Coming right back at you, big guy.

"I recently read a review about a movie with a couple 'who had everything ... except a purpose,'" Jan said. "I feel like we're a couple who has everything, including a purpose in life. It's a shame more couples don't have that. Schoolteachers aren't known for having a lot of money, but we still have everything we could want, plus a purpose in life."