

Coach extends his Newton Co. legend

► BRADLEY, from F1

When Billy Hendricks retired from coaching after three straight 20-win seasons, Rutledge had a job to fill. He said that there was no question who the newcoach would be once he heard that Bradley, twice retired, was interested in returning to Georgia after taking Port St. Joe to the Florida state semifinals last season.

"Who wouldn't want someone with a record like his?" Rutledge said. "But more importantly, who wouldn't want a man like Coach Bradley, no matter how old he is. He has touched so many lives. I'm an example of that. And I know he can touch many more. He still has the energy and the passion."

Although playing for the demanding Bradley was always rewarding, it was never easy. Bradley had turned Loganville into a surprsing winner in the mid-1990s, but would his old ways work now at Newton County?

During his first tenure at Newton, Bradley's players — like Rutledge and his two brothers — were primarily the sons of white mill workers from nearby Porterdale. Now, the players come mainly from the black sections of Covington.

"I know some people thought I was too old and couldn't adjust," Bradley said. "But kids are still kids, despite all the distractions today. They want someone to care about them and help them be as good as they can be. They love the game. I love the game. That's what matters."

Bradley, who finished last season with a 1,225-314 career record as a boys and girls coach, has always believed in strict discipline, fundamentals and making his athletes feel that they are part of something special.

All of his players have to agree to abide by strict team rules. In addition to no alcohol, drugs or tobacco, Bradley has had to add a few rules. One of the new rules is "no new tattoos." He has also had to add "no earrings" and "no braids in back."

But watching Bradley's players enter a gym on game night is like having a flashback to the early 1960s. They wear matching navy blazers, white buttondown shirts, striped ties, gray slacks and black dress shoes — just like a Newton County team would have in the first Bradley era.

At first, the players didn't

know what to think of the new (old) look.

"But Coach Bradley asked us if we dressed up for a special occasion, like a wedding," said senior center Jarvis Releford. "We said 'yes.' He said that a basketball game was a special occasion, too. I kinda like it now."

None of the players had heard of Bradley when he was hired. Nor did they know that it was their coach that the new recreation center gym at Turner Lake was named after.

Said senior guard Brandon Farrar, "I looked up at the sign over the rec gym one day, and said, 'Coach, is that you?'"

The players may not have heard of Bradley, but the older residents of Newton County sure had.

Said Bradley's wife of 46 years, Jan, who keeps the scorebook at her husband's games, "I heard someone say, 'Coach Bradley could find someone walking along I-20 and in a few weeks turn him into a NBA player.' Well I love my husband, but I know he isn't that good a coach."

Customers of People's Drug Store have a constant reminder that pharmacist Bob Richardson was a member of Bradley's 1964 state champions. Just inside the front door, there is a giant team photo with Bradley in the middle.

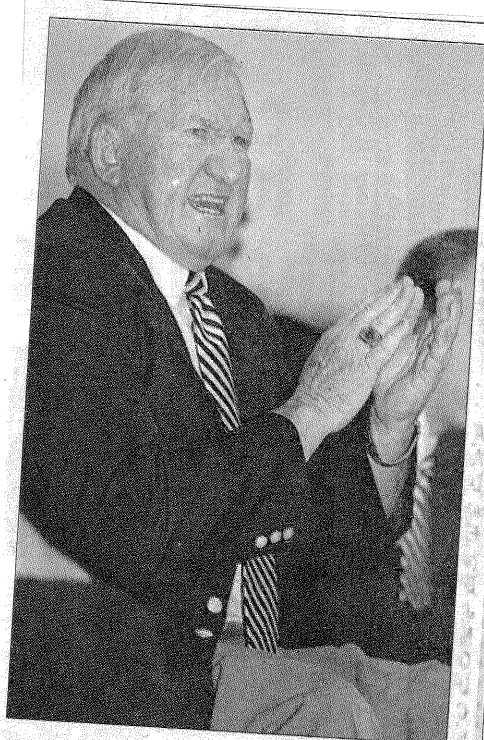
"The worst thing that Newton County ever did was let Coach Bradley slip away," Richardson said. "He had his way of doing things, but he was a great coach. Everyone is really excited to get him back. There were people at the opening game that hadn't been there for years."

Bradley was afraid that expectations would be too high this season. But the Rams — despite not returning any full-time starters — won their first three games.

That put Bradley at 1,228 career victories — 26 short of tying the late D.B. Carroll for the most victories by a state basketball coach.

"I never thought I'd coach long enough to challenge any of those records," Bradley said. "But now that I'm close, I'd like to get it. Not so much for myself, but for everyone who has been part of any success I've had."

"I retired after 30 years and again after 40. But each time, I found how much I missed it. I couldn't be happier being back here where it all started. I've come full cycle. Now that I'm back, I want to keep coaching as long as I can. It's my life."



JOHN AMIS / Staff

GEORGIA'S WINNINGEST COACHES

Newton County head coach **Ronald Bradley** could become the winningest Georgia high school basketball coach, according to the Atlanta Tipoff Club:

Coach (Years)	Boys wins	Girls wins	Overall Record
D.B. Carroll (1935-66)	557	697	1,254-283
Glenn Cassell (1952-77)	762	482	1,244-502
Ronald Bradley (1958-pres.)	875	353	1,228-314

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Basketball giant back in Newton

By GUY CURTRIGHT
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Covington — As Ronald Bradley walks into the old gymnasium where his Newton County High School boys basketball team won a record 129 consecutive home games, the memories begin to flow just like the victories used to for the Rams decades ago.

Thanks to a renovation project by the YMCA, the hardwood glistens like it did when the coach would get down on his hands and knees to polish it in the offseason. Gazing around the floor, Bradley can remember old plays and old players like it was yesterday, even though some of the events were more than 40 years ago.

The wooden stands have been empty since 1974, when Newton County opened a new high school. But Bradley vividly recalls when the 1,800 seats were always filled to overflowing, fans standing around the edges of the court. He can remember exactly where the most loyal — and earliest-arriving — fans would sit.

Arriving early was the key. If you didn't get to a Newton County game a couple of hours early, you didn't get in. But that didn't necessarily mean you couldn't see the game. Fans would climb up on the roof of the school or improvise the best they could to watch games through the high gym windows.

"This man said he really enjoyed the first half of one of our games," Bradley said. "Someone asked him why he didn't stay for the second half, the best part. He said he couldn't. His arms got too sore hanging onto the pole."

Bradley, who has won more than 1,200 games as a basketball coach, laughs. Life is perfect again. At age 66, the old coach is back where it all began. Back in a town where basketball was once king and a home winning streak that stretched from 1959 to 1967 brought national recognition.

Twenty-six years after resigning following 17 ultra-successful seasons at Newton County, Bradley is coaching the Rams again. J.W. Rutledge, who played on Bradley's 1964 GHSA Class AA state championship team and never lost a home game, is the one responsible for that. Rutledge is now the Newton County principal and his old coach's new boss.

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