

Ron's Runts

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Writer's note: This is one chapter of a book I'm writing on Ron Bradley, the winningest active high school basketball coach in the country.

"The Nutty Professor"—the original—showed at the Hub Drive-In Theater, a few miles outside downtown Covington, Georgia. Cohen's sold men's suits for \$32 on The Square, and steaks went for 89 cents a pound at Kroger.

In November 1963, Beatlemania was only beginning, the Vietnam War was two years away, and America had just buried her beloved leader. Four days after President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Ron's Runts, as history would come to know them, stepped onto a basketball court in Social Circle, and high school basketball in the state of Georgia was never the same.

Four sophomores, four juniors, two seniors, and a freshman—none of whom stood taller than 6-foot-1—formed the 1963–64 Newton County High School boys' basketball team. Whispers of destiny soon followed. "It was a unique period in history," the coach said.

Ron Bradley was 29 years old when he guided his Rams to the Class AA state championship, leaving one opponent after another in his wake. His desire to compete blended seamlessly with a simple but effective approach to the game. He taught from basketball's roots: protecting possession and efficient shot selection on offense, and aggressive, disciplined defense. No aspect of the game went unlearned.

His methods sprouted from the years of trial and error he encountered during his playing career at the high school and collegiate levels where he grasped the subtle differences between success and failure.

Bradley built his foundation on conditioning, for he knew that without stamina his team had nothing. Sacrificing much of their free time, prospective players scaled the bleachers at Homer Sharp Stadium and endured set after set of wind sprints as he rounded them into shape. Some chose to walk away, unable or unwilling to keep up with the pace the young, energetic coach set. "I never had to cut a player," Bradley said, a sneaky smile masked the passion and drive stirring within him.

He probed their resolve and character. Bradley sought not the most gifted players but the players who would give as much of themselves in a blowout as they would with a game on the line. Winning required more than smooth jumpshots.

After conditioning weeded out those who lacked the motivation to continue, the preseason regimen turned to basics: lay-ups, free throws, shooting drills, rebounding and team defense. Players operated under in-game pressures as Bradley simulated the situations they might face later in the season. He prepared them for every circumstance he could imagine.

Bradley armed them through repetition. "If you do something over and over, it becomes second nature," Bradley said.

Players who survived pre-season rigors responded to Bradley's drills and demands, and a championship-caliber team took shape. "It all started with Coach," said Bob Richardson, a sophomore in 1964 who now owns People's Drug Store on Mill Street. "He has a brilliant basketball mind. On top of that, he got players to buy into his program. We practiced fundamentals six months out of the year. When it came down to crunch time, we didn't dribble the ball off our legs or miss free throws. We knew what to do. People talk about how lucky we were ... the harder you work, the luckier you get."

Bradley was a picture of clean-cut coaching brilliance—confident, intense, and demanding. He looked and acted the part.

Heading into the magical 1963–64 campaign, he had won 130 of his 146 games with Newton County, a rural high school bathed in the shadows of a burgeoning Atlanta 30 miles to the west. Already on the coaching map locally, Bradley dove headfirst into his sixth season with the Rams and sought the state championship that would lend permanent credibility to his career.

His team won its first 27 games, suffered one disputed and wildly controversial defeat, and won its final eight games by an average of 16 points. The Rams leveled Hart County by 22 points in the Class AA State Tournament championship game before a crowd of 6,200 at the Alexander Memorial Coliseum in Atlanta. Newton County finished with a 35-1 record, and Ronald M. Bradley's legend was born.

"What I remember most about 1964 is how special those kids were and the commitment the town made to them," Bradley recalled. "It was a fantastic period, something that, to this day, still warms the old heart when I think about it. They know how special it was. Those guys were so focused. They had paid a price and felt like they deserved to succeed."

Bradley and his eleven players worked in concert. Trust flowed between them, and the Rams grew into a well-oiled machine that eventually brought home the school's only state basketball championship.

There was one hiccup along the way. The 1964 Rams remained perfect until February 11, when they were struck down for their only defeat of the season, a 59-51 triple overtime loss that remains cloaked in controversy decades later.

Tim Christian, Newton County's go-to player, had three fouls before halftime, got tagged with a fourth during the opening tip of the second half, and was disqualified before he or his coach could protest. "Everything," remembered Stanley Harris, one of two starting forwards, "was stacked against us in that game."

Hours before game time, the opponent's plot became clear. Winder filled its ban box of a gymnasium by 3 p.m.—more than five hours before the opening tip. Many Newton County supporters, renowned for their penchant for outnumbering the opposition's home crowd, were left without a seat. To worsen matters, the Rams had nowhere to sit and were not afforded the traditional opportunity to see their female counterparts play before them. For the first time, their routine was broken.

Instead, they sat in a dank lockerroom and waited their turn, the muzzled roar of the crowd hanging above them. Tension, frustration and doubt mounted, and Bradley realized his squad's perfect season was in jeopardy.

By the time the first half of play ended, the pieces of Winder's well-hatched plan were falling into place. In fact, word had already been sent to the Atlanta Journal that the 27-0 Rams would not be unbeaten much longer.

With Christian on the bench in foul trouble, they were hobbled. The prototypical golden boy, he was an All-State athlete in three sports and was courted by more than 100 colleges as a junior. He went on to play for Auburn and later became an integral part of The Atlanta Nine, the group that lured the Olympic Games to Georgia in 1996.

On that night, however, he was clearly the target, and Winder's aim was aided by officials eager to blow their whistles. Hog-tied by foul trouble, Christian made little impact on the game. Even so, the Rams fought on and forced Winder to a third overtime with their superstar player watching from the sidelines, a sweat-soaked towel draped across his shoulders.

In defeat, they also proved noble. "It was one of those games where you didn't feel like you'd lost," Bradley said. Cheated might be more apropos. A scar on an otherwise unblemished body of work, the perspective on the loss and its ultimate effects varies from player to player, even now. Some see it as a catalyst to a championship. Others view it as an unwarranted low blow, a cheap shot that kept Newton County from even greater heights. Perfect seasons are rare at any level.

On a wider scale, the defeat was an aberration, both for the Rams and for Christian. He got his revenge in the region tournament semifinals, scoring what was then a school-record 42 points as Newton County beat Winder 61-44 and brought the Bulldogs' season to an end. "The next time around, there was a little more incentive," Christian said.

Following a decisive victory in the region championship game, Bradley and his team set out to complete their climb. In the state tournament, Newton County's confidence and determination grew.

Once the Rams reached the Class AA state title game, little doubt remained about the outcome. They had eliminated Crisp County in the opening round and defeated Rockmart soundly in the semifinals. When they tore through Hart County in the finals—by a 71-49 margin—there was no collective gasp from neutral onlookers. The rout had been expected. "We were very business-like," Richardson said. "I think everybody was confident we'd win if we did what we were supposed to do."

Christian struck for 24 points in the victory and was named the tournament's most valuable player. Afterward, the team huddled together in the bowels of the arena, threw the net—which had been cut from the rim—around its coach's neck and posed for a picture. They had taken the summit. "Bradley had instilled in all the players the belief we could be as good as we wanted to be," said Steve Smith, the 57-year-old manager of the Southern Pipe and Supply Company who spent much of his energy on the bench as a sophomore guard. "We were under the belief nobody could beat us."

Now 71 and living in Loganville, Georgia, Bradley has welcomed grandfatherhood and the inescapable passage of time. Graying but not fading, he listens to the radio call of that fateful night in 1964 from time to time, reliving the moment when he and his players became kings. "It was our first state championship, and it was special," Bradley said. "When we look back at things that altered people's thinking, it was one of them."

Terry Smith, Bradley's starting point guard during the championship season, compared being on the team to something of a religious experience. "Being a senior on that basketball team at that time was sort of like heaven on earth," Smith said.

Forty-two years later, members of the 1963-64 team hold Bradley in the highest reverence, remembering a time when they found themselves on center stage and felt like the biggest stars in the world.

Perhaps the most compelling illustration regarding the celebrity status Ron's Runts achieved was the spectacle of their pre-game ritual, which Bradley carried with him to other programs throughout his career. Dressed in cleanly pressed blue suits, the team rose in unison as the preceding girls' game reached halftime and marched single file into the lockerroom, a standing ovation greeting their steps. The sold-out gym shook with applause and anticipation. Many opponents shuddered at the imposing sight. "It made you have goosebumps," said Wayne Hall, one of Bradley's defensive enforcers down low.

Newton County won all 14 of its home games in 1964, continuing an epic home-court winning streak that spanned more than seven seasons and established a national record that still stands. Theirs was a special

brand of intimidation. "They were on fire to play," Bradley said. "It was one of those years where everything fit."