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Ralph Hensley looks back with few regrets

By Rick Ryan

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- RALPH HENSLEY spent one of the first few days of his official retirement enjoying himself.

He and members of his extended family were in the Myrtle Beach, S.C., area Tuesday on a 65-degree, sunny day. Hensley took a 3-mile jog on the beach in the morning and later played with his grandchildren.

The 61-year-old Hensley was miles away, literally and figuratively, from his home in Kanawha County and his former job as football coach at Riverside High School - a position he recently relinquished after six seasons.

Hensley didn't get to enjoy himself very much in recent years as the Warriors coach. After making the playoffs in 2007, his first season as the head coach, Riverside has now missed the postseason the last five times - including a 2-8 mark this year.

Certainly the losing, combined with changing circumstances, helped Hensley make the call to step down, thus ending a 26-year run as a head coach in Eastern Kanawha County. He led East Bank to four Class AA state titles from 1979-98 before that school and DuPont merged into Riverside in the fall of 1999.

Hensley, with a career record of 176-110, resigned just five victories away from Dick Whitman as Kanawha County's all-time leader in coaching wins.

He doesn't leave with many regrets, however, other than not being able to sustain the success Riverside enjoyed at its outset.

"I'll miss working with the young athletes," Hensley said, "and seeing them develop from when they're freshmen through their senior year. When they do that, it's really pleasing.

"I felt like I could still coach. I'm in pretty decent shape and I like working with them. But I wasn't getting the job done. I'm not blaming anyone else. I'm the guy in charge and the responsibility falls in my place. I guess that's why I'm the one making the exit."

There are misconceptions about Hensley's tenure at Riverside, chief among them that he somehow let a proud program slip when he took over for Whitman after the 2006 season. The Warriors had made the AAA playoffs in each of their first six years, including a trip to the championship game in 1999.

Actually, that's not true at all.

Whitman's final two teams at Riverside failed to make the playoffs (going 5-5 in 2005 and 2-8 in



Chip Ellis

Ralph Hensley, who stepped down as Riverside coach earlier this month, stands second in all-time Kanawha County coaching wins with 176.

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2006), while Hensley's first Warriors squad did reach the postseason.

But Hensley doesn't let that kind of talk bother him, and he knows that if people judge his career by his final few years at Riverside - and ignore the overwhelming success at East Bank - then they're missing the point.

"It's part of the game," Hensley said. "When I took the job [at Riverside], I realized I had to work harder - and I think I did work hard. I'd get home late at night and my wife would say, 'What have you been doing?' And I'd tell her to come on over and see what I do and help me a little bit and I can get home faster.

"I know when I was at East Bank, we didn't win right at the start. We were 4-6, 2-8 and 5-5 before we went 9-1, and then it kind of took off from there. Sometimes it takes time."

Hensley points to a couple factors that most likely helped caused Riverside's slow tumble downward - the phasing out of the freshman team and then the lack of commitment to the school's weight program.

"I'm not sure why we got away from the ninth-grade program," Hensley said. "We moved it in with the varsity program and the ninth-grade program dwindled down. I'd say it was probably a lack of coaches to work with them. I don't know whether that was a factor or not, but we didn't get a chance to work with the ninth-graders as much as we wanted.

"I think Dick [Whitman] saw the writing on the wall. We had that little discipline program there in 2005 [eight players were suspended for allegedly drinking on the bus returning from a game in Parkersburg]. I'm not sure, but I think that kind of got to him a little bit."

Lately, Hensley admits he's had trouble getting some of the school's better athletes out for football, and also hasn't been able to sell the benefits of a year-round lifting program for his players.

"I couldn't get the kids to show up and lift," Hensley said. "I don't know whether they wanted to or not. I was there four days a week, and I was frustrated when the kids wouldn't show up. In order to win in this conference, you've got to be strong and able to run and have agility to block and make tackles.

"I didn't feel like we were getting it done, and I'm not blaming anyone besides myself. It's not like I'm forcing them to get into the weight room. They have to want to. Hopefully the new coach will be able to motivate them to do what he asks them to do."

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Still, there are a lot of things Hensley looks back on fondly during his coaching career.

From 2000-02, he got to coach his son Justin, who turned into an all-state linebacker for Riverside. He tutored players like Raheem Waiters, a sophomore who has started this year at linebacker for Marshall, and Chris Massey, a fullback on his 1996 state title team at East Bank who later played 10 seasons in the NFL, most of them as a long snapper for the St. Louis Rams.

Even this year, with a 2-8 team, there were some highlights.

Hensley watched the development of receiver Marcus Reed, a senior playing his first year of football, who finished third in the MSAC with 45 catches for 880 yards. New quarterback Trevor Rumberg, who previously had played mostly defense, blossomed into the No. 3 passer in the league and set a school record with 1,672 yards in the air.

Even his final game this year, in which a last-second field goal missed and the Warriors earned a win over Nitro, brings a smile to Hensley's face.

"There are so many kids here - good, talented kids," Hensley said. "This school could realize [success] and they could be a big help in what we could do. I'm really going to miss that. All my teams we had, most of them played hard and we never gave up. Sometimes we just didn't get the job done.

"I gave my all to Riverside. Sometimes I feel like I've done as much as I could have. I know when I got home at night, I was tired."

Reach Rick Ryan at 304-348-5175 or rickr...@wvgazette.com.

Kanawha County high school football career coaching victories

Pos-Coach, School(s) Seasons Record

1. Dick Whitman, DuPont (1983-98), Riverside (1999-2006) 24 181-96-1
2. Ralph Hensley, East Bank (1979-98), Riverside (2007-12) 26 176-110
3. Joe Cowley, Nitro (1965-68), Herbert Hoover (1970-98) 33 163-180
4. Roger Jefferson, Charleston (1980-88), Capital (1989-96) 17 161-41
5. Joe Sawyers, Sissonville (1935-43, 1946-70) 34 155-140-12
6. Delmar Good, Dunbar (1957-84) 28 131-135-13
7. H.B. Douglas, Malden (1931-38), DuPont (1939-56) 26 127-104-18
8. Mickey McDade, Charleston Catholic (1945-69) 25 126-91-7
9. Sam LeRose, St. Albans (1953-56, 1962-73) 16 124-35-3
9. Steve Edwards Jr., George Washington (1996-2012) 17 124-69

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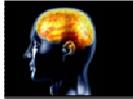
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