

Art Taneyhill

A legend among Pennsylvania high school basketball coaches

By JIM LANE

Altoona Mirror

When Pennsylvania high school girls' basketball is discussed, particularly in District 6, one name is always mentioned: Art Taneyhill.

He set the standard for girls' basketball.

Taneyhill's Altoona Lady Lions' program was one of the most successful in Pennsylvania, and it earned national honors as well.

During Taneyhill's tenure, from the 1976-77 season through the 1995-96 campaign, the Altoona girls were arguably the state's No. 1 program because of, among other things:

- Four PIAA state championship victories.
- Seven state title game appearances.
- Thirteen appearances in the Western Regional final, including 12 in his last 14 seasons.
- Twelve District 6 championships.
- Two unbeaten seasons and two USA Today mythical national championships.
- 27 players earned Division I scholarships.

"Coach Taneyhill is girls' basketball in central Pennsylvania," said Lisa (Fubio) Gehret, still considered by many as the finest Altoona player ever and a member of the first Altoona team (1981) to reach Hershey.

"He made us believe," she said. "He made us believe in ourselves, and believe in him, while he built the program from the ground up. I have great respect for him as a coach, a leader, and a friend, and I am so proud to have been a part of his legacy."

After several years as an assistant to John Swogger with the Altoona boys, Taneyhill, who had been an elementary and junior high school teacher, took a job as a guidance counselor at Altoona Area High School.

"There was a rule at the time that you couldn't be in guidance and coach, too, so I didn't coach one year," Taneyhill said. "But, then they changed that rule and they asked me to take the girls' (coaching) job when it opened."

That was the start of an incredible run.

"The first thing I did was test the girls," he said. "I found out they were willing to work and dedicate them-

selves to the game. They had an intense desire to learn and to become good.

"So, we pushed them to the limit and took them from a jump-ball game to an aggressive, wide-open, fast-breaking game that they enjoyed playing and that the fans enjoyed watching."

Taneyhill jumped into the job and built the program from top to bottom — actually bottom to top.

"Bill Acker was instrumental in getting us an elementary program," Taneyhill said. "People like Jeff Wagner (Keith) and Gary Smithmyer (Roosevelt) ran the same things with the junior high programs, and that really helped."

To build interest, Taneyhill asked principal Herk Betar and athletic director Jack Ray to move the Lady Lions' games from the afternoon to night.

"We started to win and we got recognition from the

Mirror, WRTA, and TV-10," Taneyhill noted. "Interest began to grow in the city. I think our games were exciting. We didn't win all of the time, but we scored a lot. We started getting great crowds because of the way we played."

Taneyhill was a pioneer of sorts. Altoona was the first to play girls' games at night, and they helped set a trend by bringing the team onto the court with blaring music. He put together an outstanding schedule, and he and his assistant coaches videotaped playoff opponents.

"We were a pioneer only because we did things nobody else was doing," Taneyhill said. "We had great



Art did it all while coaching the Altoona High girls, including occasionally mopping the court.

support from the administration which allowed us to do that.”

Because of their success, the Altoona Rotary Club put together a holiday tournament that attracted nationally-ranked teams from such places as Tennessee, Kentucky, New York, Wisconsin and California.

Taneyhill even had a contract with Nike which provided some equipment for the Lady Lions in exchange for using him as a clinic speaker.

Altoona’s success fueled interest in girls’ basketball throughout Blair County and central Pennsylvania.

“Art set a standard for girls’ basketball in the area, and he challenged other programs to reach that standard,” former Hollidaysburg coach Joe Hurd said. “He marketed his program and his players, and the rest of us copied him.

“His success at the national level gave rise to girls’ basketball in this area, and it was special,” Hurd said. “He was the catalyst for everything, and it was a grand time. If you look at girls’ basketball in the area now, there are good players and teams, but the one thing that is missing is Art.

“He could fire you up and make you mad, but he generated enthusiasm that was necessary to take it to the next level,” Hurd added.

Many people were surprised when Taneyhill left the girls’ program to guide the boys’ program four years.

“I got tired the last couple of years,” he said. “People got to expect things. We weren’t as appreciated and it started to wear on me.

“I thought the boys offered a good change,” he said. “We got to the Western finals the second year, and although the last two years weren’t as successful, I have no regrets.”

Memories? He’s got a ton of them.

“I had some great assistants who devoted themselves to the program,” he said. “I had a lot of great athletes, and I know I’m missing some, but Lisa Fubio, Debbie Taneyhill, Linda Schimminger and Jill Lane, the Hymes kids, Jenny Shingler, Jessica Montrella and Jill Bartley, Courtney Kaup and Jill Humbertson were willing to make sacrifices and pulled others with them during the summer.

“We had great parents, and great support from the Big A Booster Club,” he noted. “And, great administrative support, too. It wasn’t always peaches and cream, but they helped make it



Art was always animated on the sidelines.

possible.

“I remember the crowds that followed us and the welcome home receptions from Hershey,” he said. “I remember the Golden Girls from 1995-96, and some kids who didn’t get there but had great runs. I had three years with my daughter, and a lot of guys would give their right arm to do that.

“It’s great to see the kids come back to be teachers and coaches — that’s what it’s all about, not necessarily the wins and losses.”

Debbie Taneyhill, now the head coach at George Mason University, remembers being around the program as a youngster and then helping the Lady Lions reach Hershey three years in a row with her dad.

“Our lives always revolved around sports,” she said. “It was a wonderful

way to grow up — to have all those ties and experiences.

“I’m glad I got to play for him,” she said. “He’s a great coach, really cares for his players, and a lot of the way I coach is directly influenced by him.”

Taneyhill, who spent 35 years in education as a teacher, guidance counselor, coach and athletic director, has been retired two years, and he’s enjoying it.

“It was time, and it’s proved to be right,” he said. “Things have changed, and I’ve changed.”

He spends a lot of time on the golf course and serves as a radio analyst for area high school games with Charley Weston and WRTA.

“I’m hooked on golf,” he said, “and the radio has been fun, but it’s tough at times because the old coach comes out in me.”

He and wife Susan enjoy watching both of their children coach — Debbie at George Mason and Steve at a private school in South Carolina where he’s won back-to-back football state championships. They also like to spend time with their grandson, Jason.

Taneyhill’s selection to the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame tonight caps an illustrious career.

“Not many people get a chance to coach as long as I did and be successful in your hometown,” he said.

“I’ve had a lot of accolades — Coach of the Year by USA Today was a great honor and selection to the Western Pennsylvania Hall of Fame was great, but this is the ultimate.”

Taneyhill bio

Sport: Basketball.

High school: Altoona, 1961.

College: Shippensburg.

Hall of Fame achievement:

Guided the Altoona Area High School girls basketball team to four PIAA titles.

Current occupation: Retired.

Current residence: Altoona.