

Sand Mountain Reporter

Nothing but a winner

By Shannon J. Allen
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GUNTERSVILLE — It's for certain that some of Ronnie Stapler's rivals thought he would never retire, but the time has arrived for the legendary basketball coach, who enjoyed a terrific five-year stint at Guntersville.

The 60-year-old Stapler is leaving the bench, but he isn't leaving the sport he loves.

The coach will direct the Alabama Basketball Academy for D1 Sports Training in Huntsville. Co-owners of the Huntsville location are San Diego Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers and Alabama Sports Hall of Fame member Condredge Holloway.

The facility is an eight-minute drive from Stapler's home in Hampton Cove.

“(Guntersville Superintendent) Mr. (Andy) Lee and I met about a month ago, and I decided I was going to come back for at least one more year full-time,” Stapler said.

“Then right after we met, in fact a couple of days after we met, I had a deal come up with a family situation where I have an obligation to become more involved in it, and I really couldn't do it and do this job, spend the time and the hours that this job requires.

“And at the same time, another opportunity came up in a business venture to stay in basketball, where I was able to be closer to the family situation and continue to work in basketball and do things for young kids. And I just felt like my time had come.

“I still have the energy, I still like getting here at 6:45 (a.m.), I still like spending the time and I love the kids.

“The hardest thing for me to do now is to tell some mama and daddy that it's going to cost you for me to work with your kids after having done all this for 39 years for free. It really bothers me, but I think I can offer a service and I can help kids and make them better players and better people in this new venture.

“The thing I enjoy more than anything is working with the kids on an individual basis, seeing them grow as players and people, and just the every day relationships, good or bad. Sometimes relationships aren't the best in the world, but you have to mend fences and move on.

“The daily relationships with the kids and our faculty here and the administration

here are what I'm going to miss more than anything.”

Producing winners in Wildcat country

Stapler reached both the 500- and 600-win plateaus during his tenure at Guntersville from 2003-08.

Under Stapler's direction, the Wildcats compiled a 114-52 record. They won three Marshall County championships and three area tournament championships, and they also made four regional appearances.

His 2007-08 squad finished 30-6 and captured the Northeast Regional crown, earning the program's first state tournament berth since 1997.

Eight of his Wildcat players signed college scholarships — Darius Steger (Coastal Carolina), Ben Cooper (Millsaps College), Joseph Davis (Bevill State), Trent Hundley (Snead State), Heath Miller (Huntingdon College), Josh Yost (UAH), Tyler Jennings (Freed-Hardeman) and Calder Manley (Snead State).

“My five-year stay here at Guntersville has been wonderful,” Stapler said. “This is a great community to coach in. You're afforded every opportunity in the world to have the best program you can have.

“The administration, from Mr. Lee and (Assistant Superintendent) Dr. (Dale) Edwards at the board level to (Principal) Mr. (Bill) Wharton and (Assistant Principal) Dr. (Chris) Pritchett have been wonderful, and I've been fortunate to have some wonderful assistant coaches here — Johnny Harbison, Fred Steger, John Doyle, Jay Shankles and Adam Hampton.

“It's been probably the most fun five years of my life. I think if you have a philosophy of how to play offensively and defensively and have good relationships with kids and get them to buy in to how you want to play, then you have a chance to be successful.

“I think we've worked hard, and then we've had some results because of how hard our staff and our kids have worked.”

The Grissom years

The Guntersville Board of Education hired Stapler during a special called meeting April 10, 2003.

He came to Guntersville after spending 33 years at Grissom in Huntsville, where he compiled a 488-283 record on the hardwood, including winning Class 6A state championships in 1988 and 1999.

The Tigers advanced to the Final Four in 1990 and were state runners-up in 1997.

During Stapler's tenure at Grissom, the Tigers were area or region champions or runners-up 11 times.

He coached three Alabama Mr. Basketballs — Jay Scherer in 1988, the late Marvin Stone in 1999 and Chris White in 2001.

Fifty-three Grissom players signed college basketball scholarships under Stapler.

A member of the Huntsville/Madison County Athletic Hall of Fame, Stapler also coached golf, wrestling, football and softball during his Grissom career. His golf team won a state championship in 1983.

A supportive family

Coach Stapler's wife, Nancy, retired from the Guntersville faculty in 2007.

The Staplers' son, Scott, serves as an assistant coach at Coastal Carolina. Their daughter, Christy Hudgens, is a counselor at Spain Park High School.

"In all the years I've done this, my family has been so supportive," Stapler said. "My wife has been involved in every program everywhere we've been.

"I missed her so much this year, all the little things that she could do for me and the program, all the computer things she could do that I couldn't do, all the paperwork she could get out that I couldn't do anymore, that I had to have Mrs. (Carolyn) Millican or Mrs. (Amber) Malone or somebody here do.

"And to see your daughter play and be involved in athletics, and be able to coach your son and now see him be a successful college basketball coach has been a lot of fun for our family."

Scott Stapler played for his father on the 1988 Grissom state championship team.

The greatest thing

Coach Stapler is thankful to have had the opportunity to work at Guntersville, especially during a period that saw the Wildcat athletic program win six state championships.

"The greatest thing about being here is the community support," he said. "This is a great town to work in and coach in.

"Expectations are high, but they give you every resource that you need to be successful. Coaches always appreciate that.

"I think the other thing is being here and how successful in the five years that we've been here, how successful all of our other programs have been, all the state championships that all of our other programs have won and how supportive this community and our school is of all the programs.

"From academic areas to band, choral and all extracurricular activities, this community has given great support to all of us."