

For A.D. Burtschi, Coaching Is More Than Just Wins, Losses

By Terrell Lester

Archie Dean Burtschi is a multifaceted individual. A man for all seasons.

He is a man of words. A molder of men.

He is a man of initiative. A captain of small business.

He is a god-fearing man. A beacon of inspiration.

He quotes Thoreau. Summons up lines and scenes from classic movies.

He is, in total, a Renaissance man.

And, according to an august cooperative of men in the know, A.D. Burtschi is the most accomplished high-school basketball coach in the United States.

He retired in May after 33 years of leading Putnam City to the pinnacle, and keeping it there, of Oklahoma schoolboy basketball.

Along the way, he accumulated four state championships, more than 750 victories and became the gold standard for coaches following in his footsteps.

Two months after his retirement, Burtschi was recognized with the 2016 national basketball Coach of the Year award by the National High School Athletic Coaches Association.

Retirees often accept gold watches and walk away.

A.D. Burtschi received one of his profession's highest honors.

The NHSACA award celebrates a coach's longevity and commitment to his sport, while taking in to consideration his success and character.

"I was truly, truly humbled, and taken aback," he said recently during a visit in Oklahoma City.

"I thought, 'Why would anyone nominate me?'"

"I just knew that somebody had lost their mind."

Not really.

The only loser from the summer of 2016 might be Oklahoma high-school basketball.

Burtschi spent 40 of his 43 coaching years in Oklahoma, seven at Mount St.



Coach Burtschi with Pirates basketball team.

Mary High School, 33 at Putnam City.

"I was just doing something I loved to do," he said.

The 67-year-old Burtschi attained that level of happiness, that plateau of accomplishment, not through birthright or luck, but through hard work and dedication. Not to mention through the caring and love of others.

His mother and father, Arthur and Irene Link, died by the time he was 4.

He was the youngest of nine children, and with the difference in ages, the family began to fragment.

Young Archie Dean was taken in and ultimately adopted by an aunt and her husband, Bertha and Edward Burtschi of Chickasha. They operated a farm on the edge of town and a men's clothing store in the heart of town.

Family became a word that would shape, define and save Archie Dean Burtschi.

He went through 12 years at Saint Joseph Academy in Chickasha, graduating in 1967. With an above-average skill set in basketball, he caught the attention of Abe Lemons and Paul Hansen at Oklahoma City University.

"That's history right there," Burtschi said of the two coaches.

"I certainly couldn't have been in a better scenario."

Lemons and Hansen were widely known, justifiably, Burtschi said, "as a straight man and a guy with a punch

line."

"But neither one ever really got enough credit for what they knew and how they impacted the game of basketball, not only locally but nationally," he said,

Burtschi's tenure at OCU was not one of laughs and one-liners. By his second year, there were knee injuries and surgeries.

His playing career was disappearing right before his eyes.

Just as he was sinking into despair, Burtschi said he experienced "a real epiphany, a life-changing moment."

The OCU team was visiting a children's hospital in Oklahoma City.

He encountered youngsters who were terminally ill. He encountered youngsters who were unable to run and play. "Things that I had taken for granted," he said.

"It just hit me like a ton of bricks. I realized just how big of an idiot I was.

"I had been feeling sorry for myself. And I had no business doing that. I was raised better than that."

He was, after all, raised by a loving family.

"I looked around and thought to myself, 'What do you have to feel bad about? You're blessed.'"

"I grew up in that short visit," he said.

With this renewed purpose, Burtschi began to re-evaluate his position in life. And the direction in which his life would take.

"The good Lord closes one door and opens another," he said.

The open door led him to Southwestern State and Coach Jerry Jobe.

As quickly as he had matured during one visit to a children's hospital, Burtschi closed the door on basketball as a competitor "to focus and move forward in life."

Upon graduation, he landed a basketball coaching position in Kansas City, Kansas. After two years, he moved on to Alamosa, Colorado.

He chose to return to Chickasha a year later because of his mother's illness. He remained out of coaching that school year, working on the family farm, working on a master's degree.

He accepted the post at Mount St. Mary in 1976, succeeding Mike de la Garza. "And the honeymoon began," Burtschi said.

Seven seasons later, Burtschi elected to move up the ladder of competition. He applied for, and was granted, the basketball position at Putnam City.

He was Putnam City's third choice that year.

The third choice proved to be a charm for the school that had dominated Oklahoma basketball with Alvan Adams and Darrell Johnson and Coach Jim Koch in the 1970s.

But in the years before Burtschi's arrival, much of the glow of that era had diminished.

He returned the spotlight to Putnam City basketball in his first season, 1983-84, by winning 21 games.

Through the next 32 seasons, Putnam City failed to have a winning record only twice. Putnam City reached the large-school championship game nine times.

"That's not because of me," Burtschi said. "That's because of the young people that I've had. It takes talent to be successful.

"It's been a great, great, great run. It's been a great group of kids.

"They wanted to continue on this voyage, on this mission, on this dream, to be successful," he said.

"They had a coach who challenged them, who believed in them, who loved them, who backed them, who pushed them.

"It's like Thoreau said: 'Every man wants someone to make him do what he can't,'" Burtschi said.

It's not often that basketball coaches, coaches in general, are found to be quoting from Henry David Thoreau.

Burtschi was urged to explain.

"I've been influenced by a lot of different things and a lot of different people," he said.

"I am passionate about what I do. I am humbled by the game, and by those who have gone before me, and by those who are yet to come."

Burtschi confessed that he is not a voracious reader. Yet he does possess the ability to retain material from all encounters.

From his former coaches and from coaching clinics, from favorite movies and border-line celebrities, Burtschi has gleaned a lifetime of anecdotes and theories that have served him well.

At one moment, he might be bring-

ing up baseball legend Satchel Paige: "How old would you be if you didn't have a birth certificate?"

The next moment, Burtschi is moved to recalling a scene from the 1953 western "Shane":

"The little boy asks the gunfighter, 'Why do you wear that gun?'"

"The gunfighter, played by Alan Ladd, says, 'Because it's as good as any, and better than most.'"

Burtschi smiled as he thought of that line. Then he said: "I am influenced by a lot of things. I listen to life."

With his talent for telling, even retelling, stories and philosophies, Burtschi spent seven years on the road for a sporting-goods supplier as a motivational speaker.

He delivered words of inspiration, of hope, of hard work to adult audiences, just as he had hit on the same themes with his basketball-playing teen-agers.

He never needed a teleprompter.

His messages came straight from the heart. Straight from experience. Straight from family.

Over and over, he stressed to his players the importance of planning for the future.

"We need to prepare ourselves not only for the games on Tuesday and Friday, we need to prepare ourselves for the game of life," he said.

"We need to represent ourselves, our family, our community, our school in a positive way.

"Jillions of other coaches do the same thing, and I think that's where I get some of it, too," he said. "Being under other coaches, observing other coaches, hearing stories about other coaches.

"I am just a combination of bits and pieces of all those people.

"It's become a part of my DNA as to what I want to do and what I want to accomplish," he said.

Some 15 years ago, while still coaching at Putnam City, and commuting from his home in Chickasha, Burtschi set out to accomplish a life away from basketball.

He purchased a convenience store. Soon, it led to another.

Today, Burtschi oversees a string of five stores. Two are located in Fort Cobb, another is near Chickasha in the community of Norge, and others are in Verden and Carnegie.

Two of his five children manage the stores. Burtschi sees himself, in terms of professional sports, the team owner. His children, Kyra and Travis, are managers.

"I am not a stranger to hard work," Burtschi said.

"I don't ever ask someone to do something that I wouldn't do myself."

In business, Burtschi has built some-

thing of a small empire, based primarily upon friendliness and efficiency.

In basketball, he built a similar empire, based primarily upon family and efficiency.

Burtschi treated his players like sons. "I realize I wasn't their father, but I was their basketball father," he said. "I was the person that cared about them."

He held true to the lessons he learned as a youngster, one reared in a Catholic-school environment, one reared by a loving family. Be accountable. Be frank. Be forward. Be transparent.

"Believing in those strong family and work values helped us to be successful," he said.

Burtschi's family life also could be called successful. He and his wife of nearly 50 years, Jacque, have five children and nine grandchildren.

He happily acknowledges being "old school." He wears it like a badge of honor.

"My wife said I was old before my age," he said.

Despite his nonpareil communication skills, his captivating story-telling talents, Burtschi has been labeled as "not easily approachable."

"That can sometimes be confused with arrogance," he said.

"I am not arrogant.

"I am pretty down-home, down-to-earth."

On the sidelines while coaching, Burtschi carried on stretches of light-hearted banter with officials, opposing coaches, anyone within earshot.

Still, some measured Burtschi as aloof, as stand-offish, as arrogant.

In truth, he is competitive. Fiery. Spirited. Involved.

Away from the basketball spotlight, he is affable, witty, charming.

He is an ambassador for basketball. For family.

And for Putnam City Public Schools.

As his tenure was winding down, Putnam City High School officials ceremoniously scripted his name across the floor of the Pirates' gymnasium. Some 100 former players attended the festive event. The Frank Sinatra anthem "My Way" cascaded through the sound system.

He could have taken an assortment of career paths. From farmer to motivational speaker.

That would not have been A.D. Burtschi. He had one goal, one mission in life.

"I am a basketball coach," he said.

And that, in a succinct manner, defines the life and times of the otherwise multifaceted A.D. Burtschi.

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