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By JASON EPP

Leader & Times

It had to end at some point.

It had to, but that does not mean the Southwestern Heights family would not dread that day - the day Barry Mellen would decide to put down his coaching whistle and move on to the next chapter of his life.

Over 500 wins, two state championships, five title games in six state tournament appearances, 16 sub-state championships, 18 league championships, and 31 regular season tournament championships in 28 seasons as the girls basketball coach at Southwestern Heights, is coming to a close this season, his 29th at the Seward County school and 34th overall.

It all could have gone so differently too. Mellen, one of twelve children born to Lyle and Naomi, grew up on a farm near Fredonia with a love for all things sports, especially the game of football.

“I played football, basketball, ran track, and played baseball all summer. But Fredonia was a football powerhouse at that time,” legendary coach Barry Mellen said. “They had won several state championships, and made several other appearances in the title game. When I went off to college, that’s what I wanted to be - a football coach. I loved basketball, but football was my main thing.”

And after graduating from Emporia State with a double major degree in business and physical education, Mellen headed to Dighton to do just that when he was named head football coach straight out of college in 1980. His other coaching duties included being the assistant boys basketball coach, and helping with track.

After one season, the head girls basketball position came open and Mellen was asked by the school to consider taking on the task.

“When they first asked me to coach girls I said ‘no one in their right mind coaches girls.’” Mellen said with a laugh. “But the group of girls kept asking me to coach them every day. We were just coming off a state tournament appearance with the boys, so I’m still thinking no. They couldn’t find anyone so I told them I’d coach them one year.”

The girls program at Dighton had finished 3-17 the previous season, but they were about to experience a quick turnaround thanks to a great amount of determination, and the school’s choice as a new hire as superintendant.

“We had a new superintendent move in that had a 6’-2” daughter and we had success that year,” Mellen said. “Those returning girl had so much pain from the previous year they did not want to go through that again, and they played all summer. So with their determination and the new move-in we turned the season around.”

After that success, Mellen decided to stay on as the girls coach.

Just before that season had begun, Mellen also had another change in his life. On August 1, 1981 he married Melissa Ann, whom he had met while taking business courses at Emporia State.

“It was one of those things where I knew quickly she was pretty special,” Mellen said. “It took her a little longer to get used to me.”

The Mellens spent five years at Dighton when the opportunity to come to Southwestern Heights opened up, and the chance to be near grandparents made it a desirable move. So in 1985 the Barry Mellen era of Lady Mustangs basketball began.

That season Heights made it to the state tournament for only the second time in school history. Since then Mellen has amassed a 549-113 record at the school, and had only one losing season.

“We’ve had great players,” Mellen said. “We never went in cycles like most schools where you’re good for a while, then bad for a while. Because of our girls frame of mind we’ve never had that because they do what it takes to be successful.”

And Mellen has definitely been blessed over the years. Seven of his players have earned the title ‘McDonald’s All-American Honorable Mention’, and 23 others have been named all-state. One of those, Lorrie Wells, was even named Miss Kansas Basketball in 1993.

“The success goes back to the parents and the Future Mustangs program,” Mellen said. “They work with them at home and in the program. We’ve had great junior high coaches that got them ready to play. I just benefit from all the other people getting them ready.”

First, it was sending teams to be a part of the Kid’s Inc. program in Liberal, but then the Future Mustangs program came about and Heights joined with Sublette, Tribune, Elkhart, Syracuse, Stanton County to start the Saturday league.

Mellen also had most of his girls under his care most of the school year coaching them in volleyball and track for the first 16 years at Heights before consolidating his coaching efforts to just basketball the past 13 seasons.

“I didn’t realize how much time I could actually spend at home until I did,” Mellen said.

But even through all the busy seasons, Mellen managed to make time for his wife and two sons and make the time count.

“He was always attentive when I needed to talk with him,” Barry’s wife Melissa Mellen said. “I can remember I would write him a letter at times if I felt like maybe he was going in a lot of different directions. I would put the letter in his box at school and it would remind him ‘oh yeah, I have a wife and kids.’ And that was probably all in our first few years of marriage. He made up for it with how attentive he was when he was at home. His success comes because he cares so much about kids, and Barry has the ability to work with all kinds of kids. Because of that I’ve never grown tired of being a coach’s wife. I think I would grow tired of him not coaching if he hadn’t because of the kind of person he is.”

And Barry knows his success would not have been possible without Melissa.

“She has sacrificed so much over the years,” Barry Mellen said. “We had two boys and I was always going to eight or nine basketball camps in the summer. I would come home on a Thursday night and leave again on Sunday to go to another camp, and I did that for 16 years. I didn’t see my boys enough growing up, but she kept things together and they are outstanding young men. She’s always been the most giving person I’ve ever known.”

Mellen says the foundation of his coaching style started with his parents taught him. Lyle worked as a farmer and for General Portland Cement, while Naomi was very busy taking care of the home and twelve kids.

“My parents taught me if you’re going to do something, do it to the best of your ability and put your whole heart into it,” Mellen said. “They taught me, as well as my high school coaches, to

make the most of every opportunity, not just in games, but in every practice as well.”

For Mellen that meant many nights up watching film until he had left himself with only enough time for three or four hours of sleep before it was time to get up and start the next school day. He also learned to glean from other coaches as much as he possibly could.

“I’m lucky I’m not in jail,” Mellen said. “Everything I’ve ever used as a coach I stole from someone else. Just this year I stole some of Coach Hinkle’s four-out offense to use because I think it fits our team. I’m always stealing from Toby (Wynn) and Brian (Zollinger) at Seward County. Nothing I’ve done is original.”

Another of Mellen’s keys to success has been to always see importance of togetherness with his teams, and the value of every individual to the team’s success.

“Everyone contributes in some way to make this go,” Mellen said. “We’ve been blessed with so many talented players, but we’ve also been blessed with so many kids who do their part to make the team go. You have to have players who sacrifice their glory for the team’s glory. We call them role players, but what they do has just as much to do with our success as the person who scores 20 points every night. Even the player who pushes someone to work hard in practice, but may not get to play much in a game play a big role in our success.”

Mellen also knows sense of belief in the coach, each other, and the system is important as well.

“The coaches I’ve seen that have success are the ones who’ve made up their mind ‘this is what we’re going to do’ and they stick with it,” Mellen said. “You have to believe so you’ll do things the right way. You have to believe in your teammates that they want the same things. Once that comes through you can fight through adversity together. That’s what sports teach-how you fight through adversity. It’s easy when everything is going well and you’re winning, but how do you do when things aren’t going well and you’re not at your best. The year we went 26-0 someone was always someone stepping up at a critical moment or that season would have never happened. There’s always a belief on those teams that whatever comes our way, we can handle it together.”

The attributes that have made Mellen a success have been evident to the coaches he has faced over the years, and made their games against Heights ones they knew would be tough, but also ones that they looked forward to competing in.

“When I first got into coaching Barry Mellen was the guy I went to for my mentor,” Forgan Lady Bulldogs coach and longtime rival Brett Trippet said. “I went to some of his practices, and he already had a good program going. I would go and watch some of the things he was doing, and really learned a lot. I’ve always really admired him all the time I’ve been coaching against him. It’s one of my favorite games every time I get to coach against him because I know how well he prepares and all the things he does to get prepared. So if you are ever lucky enough to beat a Barry Mellen team you know you’ve had to work your tail off to get your team ready. He always has his teams prepared and ready to play. Even their warm-ups are detailed, fundamental and sound.”

With an overall record that stands at 646-128 with one semester’s worth of games left, Mellen says the love of coaching has not waned.

“Every game I still go into it with my heart pumping,” Mellen said. “Every game is still like the first for me. I’m anxious, I’m nervous and trying to get myself relaxed so I can get my players relaxed. I’m still trying to anticipate every move of the opponent. I’m still trying to analyze our players and see where we might have an advantage.”

But Mellen knows it is time to move on to the next chapter in his life.

“I know I’ll finally get to spend days with my wife,” Mellen said. “I know I’ll finally get to spend weeks with my grandkids. I’ll miss everything about coaching, but I’m looking forward to another chapter.”

Melissa is excited about the next step too, especially the grandkids.

“They’re all little now (the oldest is three), and the time we have with them now we just cherish, and seeing our sons being good husbands and parents,” Melissa said. “The second is travel.

We both love to and we've been overseas a few times and we'd like to again. We also enjoy traveling the U.S. and camping."

Mellen feels like he has been a part of very unique and special surroundings that allowed him to have the success he has had.

"I'm so spoiled with all the support from the community, especially from the parents," Mellen said. "The administration and faculty have been great. The assistants have been great to take care of so much. You have to have that to be successful. They've all gone way beyond the call of duty."

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