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Coach Ken Nelson Remembered and Honored

By Robin Schoettler Fox



Hung at St. Perpetua's meeting hall during Coach Nelson's memorial service reception, this banner was up the weekend prior at Tice Valley's basketball court during the Thanksgiving youth basketball tournament. The St. Perpetua CYO picture on the left is actually a combined picture - two 1993 6th grade teams, both coached that year by Ken Nelson and Phil Doherty. Both teams won their respective Dio

It almost doesn't matter who you ask - player, coach, or parent -- the answers sound the same: Ken Nelson was a mellow coach, not a typical sideline yeller, the kind of coach who encouraged team play, who was in it for the kids and had no personal agenda.

That alone is cause to applaud in today's competitive youth basketball world. But it doesn't put a moniker on a tournament as well respected as the long standing Campolindo Freshman Tournament, renamed the Ken Nelson Invitational after Coach Nelson succumbed to cancer in late November.

Coach Nelson's story is about reach, a coach's long-term influence on the local youth basketball landscape.

"The umbrella is huge," says Matt Watson, Campolindo's Varsity Coach, adding that the age range of those who've played for Nelson spans from current 3rd graders to men approaching 30.

"(Coach Nelson) was a person who put a lot of his time and life in support of basketball," says Zach Kisner, one of St. Perpetua's (St. P's) 7th grade Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) players Coach Nelson planned to coach this season, having taken them to the Diocese Championships last year.

In box-scores of youth basketball, Coach Nelson's numbers are impressive, just looking at years with different basketball programs: St. P's CYO, 21 years; Flight Elite, 8 years; Diablo Warriors, 7 years; Acalanes, 1 year; Campolindo, 3 years - this was to be his 4th.

"You would be hard pressed to find many kids playing (local) high school

basketball who weren't either coached by Ken or played in one of his programs," says Phil Doherty, who first met Nelson in 1987 at their sons' 3rd grade CYO tryout. Initially, Doherty coached alone. Within a month Nelson joined him, becoming "Coach" for the first time, a name he proudly owned until the day he died, having coached his final game just a month earlier.

The days of winter-only basketball are over. Club teams play year round. So do high schools. Serious CYO teams join off-season leagues. Yet Coach Nelson rarely took a team off his clipboard, continuing to coach CYO even after he and Doherty started the year round Diablo Warriors program.

At the time of his death, his offer to help one CYO team had blossomed into Coach Nelson's 12-months-a-year youth basketball coaching vocation. To say he spent weekends in gyms is no lie.

Some say Coach Nelson was a second father figure for players, maybe even like a grandfather.

Kisner explains: "He just treats every player like he's known them for a really long time, even if it's like the first time he ever coached them. It makes you feel like you're home almost."

For coaches, Nelson was the go-to guy, St. P's long time Athletic Director, the keeper of the gym keys. One call to Nelson and he'd be there to open the gym, substitute coach or find the missing score-table clock. At one time or another, Coach Nelson carried keys that opened every Lafayette public school gym. More recently, he'd added a Campo set. Even when he passed A.D. reins to Dan Baker, he kept keys and his seat on the CYO board.

"The beauty of a guy like Ken is that he always wanted to make sure we did things that made sense for the program and for the kids," says Baker. "He had no agenda."

Except maybe to improve as a coach.

"He was famous for re-hashing games over a cold beer," says Doherty.

"Mostly, he just wanted to be comfortable that he was reaching the kids and getting the most from them."

Coach Nelson's memorial service at St. P's was a capacity crowd of familiar gym faces, including all three Campo boys' basketball squads sitting together in their team travel clothes, and the pew of 7th grade St. P players in Sunday best topped with basketball jerseys. Other former players, some currently on Acalanes Varsity, as well as area coaches dotted the crowd.

Coach Nelson had recently received hundreds of letters and emails, expressing not just concern but also gratitude. But it was a thank you letter sent last summer, former player to coach mentor, penned by former Acalanes varsity guard Robert O'Keefe as he prepared to go to San Diego State, that hit home when read at the ceremony:

"Ken, you not only taught us the game of basketball but instilled in us the qualities of passion, perseverance, and eagerness to take on a challenge. Sure, our family and friends had an influence on our well beings, but without our youth basketball, I very much doubt we would be the individuals we are today."

A coach's reach, it can extend beyond the court. And when it does, that's worth putting a name on a tournament. So Campolindo did. The Ken Nelson Invitational Tournament is scheduled for December 10-13. Campolindo and Acalanes will both be playing.

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