

Hruska is big part of Kirkwood's success

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kirkwood Community College honored Kim Muhl on Saturday for his 750 victories as their women's basketball coach, an accomplishment that includes six national titles and a string of other major accolades during the past 26 years.

Joe Hruska has been loyally at his side for most of it.

Hruska, 56, has been one of Muhl's assistant coaches for 24 years with the women's basketball program. Prior to that, he helped Muhl with the Kirkwood softball program when Muhl was running that team as well.

Hruska also served as an assistant coach with the men's basketball program at Kirkwood before switching sides and joining the women. He's been there for all six national titles, 15 national tournaments, 20 straight 20-win campaigns, a school-record 37 wins, a string of 106 straight conference victories and 24 All-Americans.

"You know, it's been a pretty good run," he said Saturday with modest pride.

Hruska got an early start in coaching. He graduated from Cedar Rapids LaSalle High School in 1977 and the very next year was working as an assistant coach with the boys basketball team there with Coach Al Arp.

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"I was 18," he said.

He's been coaching ever since, including 11 years at LaSalle and the past 27 years at Kirkwood.

He's still thankful to Arp for getting him started. Twenty years after graduating from LaSalle, he helped Muhl and the Eagles win their first NJCAA Division II national title in 1997.

"I'll never forget, when we won that national title in '97 I wrote him a two-page letter saying, 'If it hadn't been for you I wouldn't have had this opportunity,'" he remarked.

Hruska was a pitcher on local fast-pitch softball teams and Muhl used to see him practicing at Johnson Hall. Muhl invited Hruska to join the softball program, then a few years later they joined forces with the women's basketball team.

They've formed a special bond and friendship.

"I'm old-school," said Hruska. "I still think I should wash uniforms and do the stats. I think a lot of younger coaches just want to coach, and I don't think that's my role."

He's a confidante, trusted companion, recruiter, friend and assistant coach, with a sharp basketball mind.

Hruska is not a full-time employee at Kirkwood. He works in the Technical Services Division at Quaker Oats and has enjoyed a long career with the company in downtown Cedar Rapids.

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He works an eight-hour shift at Quaker from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., then heads to Kirkwood for practices, games and road trips. He used to work the graveyard shift at Quaker from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., often heading to work after one of Kirkwood's games.

Hruska does not have a college degree, but when Gregg Bosch hired him as an assistant men's basketball coach at Kirkwood 27 years ago it came with a stipulation. He told Hruska he had to go to school.

"So I was taking classes and stuff," he said with a grin. "I think I'm one class short of having a two-year degree from Kirkwood. It's something that bugs me. I'd like to get it."

Kirkwood went to the national tournament in 1997 with only modest goals, just happy to be there for the most part. "We get to nationals and all of a sudden we win a game," said Hruska. "I said to Kim, 'maybe we can do something here.'"

They kept winning until there were no more games to win.

Muhl does not know how long he'll keep coaching at Kirkwood. He's pondered the possibility of trying for 1,000 wins, as long as he still enjoys the work and the players. But he's also said he'd quit tomorrow if he wins the lottery.

It could be a package deal.

"I told Kim, when he doesn't have a passion for it anyone will probably be the time I need to get out, because he fires me up," said Hruska. "He fuels me with his fiery attitude. I love that."

Hruska is single, but he considers Kirkwood as part of his extended family. He enjoys visiting with former players when they return to campus, like they did Saturday to honor Muhl on his

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750 (now 753) victories.

"The girls are your kids," he said. "I've watched these kids grow up. They come back, and it's like your daughter visiting with their kids.

"This is a pretty good thing," he said, "and it's because of what Kim has done."

It's been a winning team.