

By Dan Cleary

3/26/2015 - Tobin Calls It A Career At Hopatcong

When you walk into the spacious and beautiful gym at Hopatcong High School the first thing that strikes you are the jerseys hanging in the rafters. The professionally done replicas have the name, jersey number and points scored of every 1,000-point scorer in school history, both boys and girls. It also houses jerseys honoring legendary boys basketball coach Rick Fincken and outstanding former girls coach Bob Wheeler. The jerseys give the gym a college feel and does a great service honoring the 46 years of Hopatcong basketball.

Well, if you want my two cents, the school should add one more jersey in the near future--Jim Tobin.

After being involved in Hopatcong basketball since 1969 first as a player, then youth coach, assistant coach and finally the boys varsity head coach since 1997, Tobin has decided to hang up his whistle.

Tobin informed his players and the school last week and confirmed to me this week that the 2014-2015 season was his last one on the Chiefs sidelines, and what a way to go out. The veteran mentor guided the Chiefs to a 15-9 record, the NJAC Colonial Division crown (8-1) and an impressive win over Boonton in the North 1, Group 1 state playoffs after going 8-15 last season. No replacement has been named yet.

"This year's team was an unbelievable success story," said Tobin, who was a member of the first class to go four years through Hopatcong before graduating in 1973.

"They played as a team in all facets of the game," he added. "Like we said all season we found a way to win."

Mugs Media recently honored Tobin as one of our Coaches of the Year not knowing this was his last campaign. Tobin said he made his decision earlier in the year and he kept it quiet in his usual style as he didn't want the season to be about him. That is one thing about Jim Tobin folks, its never about him. It is about the kids and that is not just lip service.

Earlier this year I wrote a blog about the wonderful season the Chiefs had in winning the Colonial, having no idea he was going to step down. What a going away gift his players unknowingly gave him.

But one thing the players did know was how to play hard and play the game right and that is a direct reflection on Tobin, one of the best X and O guys around, but probably even a better guy.

"I'm very happy for all the success the kids have had," said Tobin. "I always wanted them to work hard because that will always help them later in life."

Tobin said there was no epiphany of when he decided to step down. It was a process and then he finally made his decision.

"It was just wearing on me with the long nights and scouting and doing the things you need to do," said Tobin, the Mugs Media Coach of the Year in 2015, 2010 and 2006.

"I still enjoy coaching and I love the kids and going to the gym," he added. "But you know when it is time. It is time for a new direction."

Tobin said he will miss the interaction with his fellow coaches, like Joe DiGennaro at Jefferson. He added he will still run the Hopatcong Summer League and be involved with the school like he always has the last five decades.

Tobin started as a very good player for Fincken and played a huge role in the fast rise of the program which reached a section final the year after he graduated. Tobin played with 1,000-point scorers Charlie Morgan, Tim Cerezo and Greg Leslie who laid the foundation for Hopatcong's success in the 1970s and 1980s. He was also a role model for his younger brother, Dennis, who went onto score over 2,000 points before graduating in 1978 and going onto play at UNC-Wilmington. I dare say there hasn't been a major moment in Hopatcong hoops history that Jim Tobin didn't witness or played a part in over the last 46 years.

Incredible.

After helping out in the rec programs for years, Fincken brought Tobin on as an assistant before Tobin took over for the Hall-of Famer in 1997.

"My coaching career is basically is in two phases," he said. "The first eight years we weren't successful and we were trying to build the program. And the last 10 years we had some success with my nephews (Dennis' boys, Mike and Matt) and this past season. It is like having two separate careers."

Mike helped the Chiefs get back on the winning track and pumped in 1,594 points before graduating and going onto a fine career at East Stroudsburg.

But it was Matt and his teammates that helped the Chiefs win a couple of NJAC Freedom Division titles before he graduated as the county's all-time leading scorer with 2,350 points in 2011. Matt just finished up an outstanding career at East Stroudsburg and was recently named All-Region.

Jim Tobin said he had too many fond memories to pick just one, but coaching his son, Jim, his nephews, and Bobby Smith, his first 1,000-point scorer, come to my mind.

I can't think of anyone more identifiable with Hopatcong and Chiefs hoops than Jim Tobin. He has been a great ambassador for the school and he has done it with class and dignity. In fact, it was a labor of love for him and former athletic director Tommy Vara to get those jerseys hung in the rafters, and like I said, it is very cool to see them. So he may not have scored 1,000-points or won over 300 games, but there hasn't been anyone who has done more for Hopatcong basketball than Jim Tobin.

So here is hoping the school does the right thing and adds his jersey to rafters. And one final thing, Jim, that broadcasting spot is still open whenever you want it.

That's it for now see you on the sidelines.

2/19/2015 - Chiefs Find A Way To Win

It might not be as famous as the old Raiders' mantra of "Just Win, Baby," but for the Hopatcong boys basketball team, "Find A Way To Win" is just as effective.

That philosophy has carried the Chiefs all season, through thick and thin, and as a result, the ever resourceful Chiefs can lay claim to their first boys hoops title since 2011.

The Chiefs faced the very daunting task this week of having to knock off Newton and Wallkill Valley on the road in order to win the NJAC Colonial Division title outright.

Not an easy task considering Newton had won seven of its last eight games, was looking for revenge after a blowout loss to the Chiefs in January and was playing in the very cozy confines of Boresch Memorial Gym.

And if the Chiefs found a way to get past the Braves and clinch at least a share of the title, then it would be off to Wallkill Valley to take on a Rangers team that was capable of beating any team in the division, and for all accounts and purposes, should have topped the Chiefs in their first meeting, a 49-48 loss at Hopatcong.

So what did the Chiefs do?

They found a way to win, In two nail-biting, one-point victories the Chiefs rallied to stun Newton 36-35 on a buzzer-beating putback by Tobi Olugbenga on Tuesday and then knocked off the Rangers 52-51 thanks to a couple of clutch free throws from Anton Pezzano to win the division outright Thursday to finish the division slate 7-1 and improve to 13-7 overall after going 8-15 last year.

Wow.

Not too many people felt, except those in the Hopatcong locker room and its die-hard fan base, that the Chiefs had enough to go on the road and come home champs but that is a credit to them, and especially Hopatcong head coach Jim Tobin.

I'm most happy for Tobin who bleeds Hopatcong green. The longtime

head coach has been part of the program in some capacity from a player to a coach since its inception in the late 1960s,

Yes, he had success when he had Mike then Matt Tobin and won a couple of Freedom Division titles with Matt Tobin.

But this team is different. There isn't a superstar and this team does it with defense or should I say a variety of defensive looks that keep opponents on their toes.

With or without one of his nephews, Jim Tobin can flat out coach. The kids respond to him and play hard for him. He is not one of those dinosaurs who refuses to change, but he is an old school coach that is willing to adapt.

And no one works harder than Tobin. He is so well-prepared that his teams are never caught off guard and preparation can win you a lot of games in high school sports.

Tobin can give you a scouting report on almost every team in Sussex and Morris counties and he is always spot on.

Add in the fact that he is one of the best guys you want to meet and it is very easy to be happy for his success. I know there is no rooting in the press box, but you can be happy when someone you admire and respect does well.

You know what I root for? Good ballgames. The name on the jersey means nothing to me.

And you know what Hopatcong gave us this week? Good ballgames.

I was fortunate enough to call the Newton game with Brian Thomas and it was a dandy. Hopatcong was down eight at the half, but then went on a 15-4 run in third to take a 26-22 lead into the final quarter.

This was a grind it out every possession-type game that neither team was willing to give away.

Newton, led by its fiery coach Dirk Kelly, battled back thanks to a couple big baskets by Samir Wheeler and a huge steal and a bucket from J.J. McDaniel with 11 seconds left to give Newton a 35-34 lead.

I know 11 seconds is a lifetime in basketball, but you had the feeling Newton would avenge its loss and it would have the upper hand in winning the division with just the lone loss to the Chiefs.

And Hopatcong would suffer its second division defeat and its dreams of a title would be diminished.

But again, 11 seconds is an eternity, and it sure seemed like that for Newton.

Tobin called a timeout and set up a play for lefty Chris Marcinek to bring it up, get a screen and attack the basket from the left side. But Tobin also said that because of the time factor, weak side rebounding would be the key in case of a miss.

Once again, Tobin's impeccable preparation paid off. Although I'm sure he wished Marcinek converted, Olugbenga followed his role, got the board and stuck it back in to beat the buzzer and the celebration was on.

It was Olugbenga's second game-winner as he beat Wallkill Valley with a nifty reverse layin with just seconds left in the January win.

It was a typical Hopatcong victory. Everyone contributed, the team played great defense in its zone and "junk" looks and the game was not decided to the end.

Great for fans and media, but not so great for the coach, but you know what? They found a way to win.

After the win the Chiefs decided a share of the title wasn't enough and they held off Wallkill Valley and that is the type of mental toughness this team has.

Several players were members of the Liberty Division championship team in football this past fall and that confidence has carried over to the hardwood.

Against Newton, the Braves made it a point to try to shut down Hopatcong's top scorer in John McCloskey and did a nice job. But Jonathan Yanko stepped up and scored 10 points to lead the way.

That is what championship teams do.

The Chiefs have a nice balance of players who do different things. Marcinek handles the point and can shoot 3s. McCloskey is very dangerous from the perimeter and inside as is Olugbenga.

Yanko is known more for defense and rebounding but he showed what he can do with the ball against Newton. And junior Anton Pezzano is blossoming in front of our eyes as a low-post player and is turning into a good one.

James Cranmer, a football player, gives the Chiefs good size and strength coming off the bench.

And they all play great defense. The Chiefs have not allowed over 60 points in a game this season, including games versus very good teams like Jefferson and Hackettstown.

The Chiefs want to get you in a dogfight and make you work to the final buzzer. They are just mentally tough.

But that toughness was put to the test on a very tough weekend at Hopatcong two weeks ago when the very scrappy North Warren Patriots came to town.

Hopatcong had beaten the Pats, in yes, a close one, earlier in the year. But North on back to back nights gave Hopatcong its first division loss (47-35) and ousted the Chiefs from the Hunterdon/Warren/Sussex Tournament the next evening, 41-35.

Many thought this would open up the Colonial race, and it did, but how did the Chiefs respond? They found a way to win.

In fact they have not lost since winning five straight.

Toughness.

And I haven't even mentioned the fact that the Chiefs projected starting point guard Andrew Nee hasn't played a minute this season after blowing out his knee during football season.

So with the division in their pocket the Chiefs will play a couple of independents before hosting Boonton in the North 1, Group 1 playoffs March 3 and they will continue their mantra of finding a way to win.

And although the motto might not be sexy enough for a tee-shirt, a shirt with 2015 Colonial Division Champs emblazoned on it certainly will do just fine.

That's it for now see you on the sidelines.