

Coach Meyer retires with 923 wins

On Monday, Feb. 22, Northern State University's men's basketball coach, Don Meyer, announced his retirement at the end of the 2009-2010 season, stepping down after 11 seasons with the Wolves.

The news of Meyer's retirement spread quickly throughout the campus and the nation, and at 3 p.m. that same day a press conference was held to address the news. NSU president, Dr. James Smith, athletic director Bob Olson, and three current NSU men's basketball players, junior center Marty Gregor, Chaska, Minn., sophomore forward Casey Becker, Beulah, N.D., and junior guard Brett Newton, Tyler, Minn., were there to field questions from the media. Meyer was not present at this press conference; in true Coach fashion, he thought it more important to be preparing his team for the last few games of the regular season.

At this press conference Smith announced that Meyer will be retiring from basketball but will remain at NSU. Meyer will be remaining on staff in the role of Regent Distinguished Professor, and will help promote the image of NSU through public speaking, consulting, workshops, seminars, special appearances, and fundraising activities.

"Coach Meyer is a legend," Smith said. "We're very excited about him joining the president's office staff, working with us, working with the foundation, and continuing to work with athletics as well. Being offered a position here at Northern makes it much easier for all of us because he's still going to be a part of this family." Meyer will also continue to do as many clinics as he can, allowing him to continue to teach, influence, and inspire basketball players and coaches.

Meyer is retiring from coaching due to health reasons relating back to his car accident in September 2008, which resulted in the amputation of his left leg below the knee and the discovery of carcinoid cancer in his liver and small intestine. After consulting with his physicians and family, Meyer decided that it was finally time to hand over the position to someone who could give the NSU basketball program the time and energy necessary to keep it as successful as Meyer had built it to be.

"Coach Meyer has elevated this program to one of the top Division II programs in the country, and he's done it with class and dignity," Olson said. "[Meyer's] number one concern is for the players and the program. He is so committed to this program and wants this program to be so successful that if he himself feels that he can't do it that's a pretty good indicator."

Olson is confident that the basketball program will continue to be successful after Meyer retires. He said that the program has a great foundation, one that is very solid and established, and much of that is thanks to Meyer.

Meyer's basketball players admitted that they were initially surprised when Meyer told them he was retiring.

"There are mixed emotions for us," Becker said. "We know that this is what's best for Coach. We know that he's made a decision based on the team – what's best for the team, what's best for the program – and that's what's comforting is that he's doing it because he knows that's what's right for us."

There was no doubt in any of the players' minds that Meyer was still a really good coach this year. "He's still the most competitive man I've ever met," Becker admitted. "Till his last day he'll still be the best coach I know."

"I think we knew Coach was struggling but because of his mental toughness we tended to look past it sometimes," Newton said. "We depend on him so much that we realize how strong of a person he is. We tended to look past the cancer because that's not him."

While Meyer was thinking about the team, the team was thinking about him. "What's best for coach is to stay healthy and be with his family," Gregor said.

Newton added, "Coach isn't done. This is just another chapter for him. He could affect 12-15 kids next year or he could go out and spread his message. It's something that he can touch more people. We've been lucky enough to have him touch us. It's just another chapter for him and he's going to be great at that next step."

"He's still going to impact our lives," Becker said, "He might even have a greater impact now that he's not coaching."

The players are also optimistic that the program will remain strong after Meyer steps down.

"We have faith in the decision making," Newton said, "and Coach has faith in it, too. If he didn't he wouldn't have taken the route that he did."

As to whether or not Meyer's retirement was an added incentive to play extra well on Saturday night against Southwest Minnesota State, the players said that they tried to focus on simply playing the game to the best of their abilities, just as they have all season long.

"The biggest thing is the adversity and how we respond to it probably after the season ends. How we come together as a team, that's what's probably more important than one game," Newton said. "We shouldn't play for any reason other than each other and that's what Coach would want."

On Saturday, Feb. 27, Meyer coached his last game on the court that now bears his name when his team took on the Southwest Minnesota State Mustangs. The Barnett Center was packed to overflow, requiring staff to pull out the bleachers of the auxiliary gym.

Northern fans have set national records for attendance, and this night was sure to be no different. The games for that night were dubbed “white-out” games and attendants were encouraged to wear white to support the Wolves.

Prior to the tip-off for the men’s game, Smith addressed the crowd. He mentioned how Meyer believed in the three “F”s: faith, family and friends, and those are what make people what they are.” Smith later added, “Coach Meyer is retiring at the top of his game; the game of life.”

After Smith’s comments a marble bust of Meyer was unveiled. The bust was completed by Ben Victor, a nationally-recognized sculptor and current NSU artist in residence. It was donated by John and Laurie Schwan of Schwan Financial Group, LLC.

The game ended in a heartbreaking loss for the Wolves, 51-56, despite several strong performances from many of the players as well as the energy and support of thousands of fans.

Post-game, Meyer addressed the 5,685 fans in attendance. “I wanted to have this chance to tell all you guys that you’re special,” Meyer said, mentioning all of the support that his family and he have received since his accident. “You’re just great people. You’re not fake, you’re not phony, you’re real, and when you say something you mean it and you follow up what you say.”

“I don’t have any regrets in being a coach. There’s nothing like coaching a team and there’s nothing that will ever replace that. I hope that we can all be a team in this community to do the things that have to be done to keep Aberdeen growing.”

“I love the game of basketball, but not as much as I love the players. I’ll miss them and I’ll miss the coaches, too; screwing around, playing with their minds,” said Meyer, before adding with a grin, “what little there is to play with.”

“I just want to thank God for giving me the family that I have, the teams and players and coaches that I’ve been able to work with, and I want to thank Him most of all for letting me live long enough to coach so many games with so many teams and to meet so many wonderful people.”

The press conference after the game was the only media availability with Meyer. Meyer started by telling reporters that he had known since late December that he couldn’t coach anymore. Recruiting was suffering because he couldn’t make the long trips and he couldn’t demonstrate techniques on the floor anymore. One of the things he missed most while recovering from the accident was being able to run individual work outs with the players because “that is how you build relationships with players – when you’re working with them on individual skills.”

“I’m just not the coach I was,” said Meyer, “and I’m not going to coach if I can’t be the best coach that I can be.”

Meyer said it would have been nice to end the night with a win, but “you can’t wish you win because then you never win.”

When asked how he wanted the Northern fans to remember him, Meyer said, “I’d rather they remember the teams than the coach. If the kids aren’t a reflection of the coach then he’s not a very good coach.” He corrected himself, adding, “Even when he’s not a very good coach they still reflect him.”

Meyer said he’s not going to regret retiring because if he stayed where he was it was going to hurt the program. As far as returning to coaching later is concerned, he said, “I just don’t see it happening.”

The most important thing he has learned from coaching is how not to be selfish. “I’m basically a selfish person. That’s why I like to recruit guys that are unselfish, because it teaches me to be an unselfish guy.”

“There’s no game like basketball where you can win games – when you aren’t as good – if you are a real team.” Meyer finds Division I basketball almost disgusting to watch today because most programs are now all about the money and winning. “It’s not about winning; it’s about how you win and how you play the game.”

Meyer joked that part of his new job will be to make coffee for the president, but he admits he’ll probably just have Brenda [Dreyer] make the coffee and he’ll carry it over. “If I made the coffee our president would probably be dead in about a week.”

On a more serious note, though, he added, “I hope I can help the school and the community. I don’t just want to be here just so that they’re letting me be here.” “It’s time for me to go and for a new guy to come in that’s got some juice and got some energy, and it’s time for the school, town, and community to get behind him and support him.”

“The biggest thing I’m looking forward to is the new coach. I’ll be ready to help him all I can but I won’t be coming over and sticking my nose in stuff.”

He told his players in a team huddle earlier that night, “You guys better remember what I was trying to tell you because all along I knew I wasn’t going to be coaching again and I was still telling you because I was trying to help you for the next guy.”

Senior guard Mitch Boeck, Arlington, played his last game with the Wolves, ending the night with 16 points and ending his college basketball career with 1,119 points. He said that the most important thing that Meyer taught him was discipline, “obviously on the court but also with school, people, everything, and just doing everything for the right reasons.”

Junior guard Jordan King, Arlington, added that the most important thing he's learned from Meyer is stepping up and being man. King went on to discuss what's next for the men's basketball team. "The most important thing is to have a good off-season," said King. "We still have the potential to be great. If we work hard now it will pay off later."

The process for finding a new men's basketball coach began as soon as Meyer's retirement was announced. Applications are now being accepted and on Mar. 8 a search committee will come together for the first time to view applicants.

"We want to go quickly but not so quickly that we eliminate somebody," said Olson, pointing out that many teams are still playing and Northern doesn't want to exclude those potential applicants.

Some career highlights for Meyer include:

- In January 2009, Meyer won his 903rd game, breaking the record for most career coaching wins in NCAA men's basketball history.
- In July 2009, he was the recipient of the ESPN Jimmy V. Perseverance Award.
- In April of 2010 he will receive the "Legends of the Hardwood Award" at the NCAA Final Four.

While all of these wins and awards are significant, the most important thing is that Meyer has influenced and inspired thousands of people, and he will continue to do so with his new position. This is the legacy that he will be leaving behind at Northern.