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Leaving the Court, But Never the Team: Legendary coach Dick Whitmore retires after 40 years, but his relationship with his "basketball people" endures

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LEAVING THE COURT
BUT never THE TEAM

LEGENDARY COACH DICK WHITMORE RETIRES AFTER 40 YEARS, BUT HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS “BASKETBALL PEOPLE” ENDURES

BY GERRY BOYLE ’78
ut for a lone player and basketball coach Dick Whitmore, Wadsworth Gymnasium was empty that weekday afternoon in late April. The season was long over, and Whitmore, who had led the team for 40 years, had announced his retirement weeks before.

But on this day he was on the court, ball in hand, demonstrating a move on the perimeter, giving one-on-one tutoring to a player who would compete next season—without him.

“That’s what I am,” Whitmore said with a shrug, when reminded of the private session later. “I’m a basketball coach, and Colby is the place I love.”

The present tense says a lot about the decision. When “Coach Whit,” as he’s known to legions of present and former players going back to his arrival on Mayflower Hill in 1970, talks about his impending exit, his eyes mist over. He isn’t ashamed to say that he broke down crying after he shared the news with the team in March. But the decision has been made. The final buzzer has sounded.

“I think that the decision is still strong in my mind,” he said.

The news that Whitmore was stepping down as head basketball coach reverberated through the Colby basketball community, a tight-knit but far-flung group of ex-players and friends that has Whitmore and his perennial assistant coach John “Swisher” Mitchell (who is also retiring, see story page 23) at its nexus. “I must have had, between cards and e-mails, close to a thousand contacts,” Whitmore said of the congratulatory deluge. And, in characteristic fashion, he replied to every one.

With 637 wins in his 40 years, Whitmore ranks seventh all-time among Division III coaches. Under his stewardship, Colby men’s basketball won three East Coast Athletic Conference championships. The Mules were ranked as high as second in the country in D-III (1984-85). Whitmore has coached 13 All-Americans, including his son Kevin ’91. But for Whitmore those are only some of the highlights. Yes, there were the championships, the multiple 20-plus win seasons. But Whitmore knows there were other memorable teams that aren’t in the record books, important players whose numbers don’t hang on the wall of the Wad-
“He has unwavering loyalty to each and every person who played for him or who comes into his circle.”

— Chad Higgins ’97

Basketball coach Dick Whitmore, facing page, buddles with his players courtside during a time-out in the 1970s. Rather than ordering set plays, Whitmore was known for teaching his players to solve problems posed by opponents. Above, Whitmore, standing, in trademark loud trousers. At one point assistant coaches installed a belt on the coach’s chair to try to keep the voluble Whitmore from running onto the court.

swoth Gymnasium. “One of the real special times was one of our teams that started out horrifically and ended up finishing at five-hundred because they just willed themselves to do it,” Whitmore said. “That was an experience I’ll never forget.”

His players (they don’t use the word “former”) will tell you that he doesn’t forget much.

Whitmore has an e-mail list of several hundred Colby basketball alumni and others who receive his post-game reports. Sixty or more check in after every game (not the same 60) and offer congratulations, encouragement, advice for the next contest, he said. But in terms of interaction with Coach Whit, that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

Whitmore offers patient and considered counsel on everything from career moves to relationships. He makes networking calls for ex-players—and their partners. He is a frequent flier to far-off weddings and sends congratulatory cards when babies are born. He shows up beside hospital beds and at funerals. “My mother died two years ago at eighty-nine years old, and the first person at the wake was Whit,” said Jim Crook ’78. “The first person through the door.”

Whitmore is also one of the first people ex-players call when things are going badly with a job, a marriage, health. “It’s not a bed of roses for everybody,” he said, as if that told the whole story. But it doesn’t.

“He has unwavering loyalty to each and every person who played for him or who comes into his circle,” said Chad Higgins ’97. “And that is regardless of whether you are a Matt Hancock and scored the most points in the history of the school and helped win championships and were an All-American, or"

THE CONSTANT

ASSISTANT COACH JOHN “SWISHER” MITCHELL STEPS DOWN FROM THE BENCH

John “Swisher” Mitchell played on the 1944 New England champion Waterville High School basketball team, then for the University of Rhode Island. A junior high school teacher, he coached local high school teams and then joined the Colby program as an assistant. He had three years under his belt when a new coach arrived in 1971. “I didn’t know Dick Whitmore,” he recalled. “We got along fine. His father had coached at Cheverus [High School], so I knew his dad a little bit. When we sat down the first time, I said, ‘Whit, I don’t want to sit and count time-outs for you. If you want me fine, if you don’t, let’s get done with it.’”

Whitmore wanted him. And the two would share the bench for 40 years. “He’s one of the most brilliant basketball minds you could ever want to have beside you during a game,” Whitmore said. “He’s just been an amazing help that way.”

Mitchell, he said, has played basketball at a very high level, and the players loved him. “And he was able to say no to me, which is good,” Whitmore said.

Whitmore, Mitchell says right back, was always a straight shooter, fair, never singled a player out for public criticism.

From the beginning the pair supported each other both on and off the court.

“I think we understood each other,” Mitchell said. “I think he had respect for me and I had respect for him. He never listened to everything I said, and I didn’t think he was right all the time, either.”

Mitchell said, “I think he had respect for me and I had respect for him. He never listened to everything I said, and I didn’t think he was right all the time, either.”

Players say the pair complemented each other. Whitmore pushed the players to higher levels; Mitchell offered encouragement in the background. On the sidelines during games, Whitmore was vocal and demonstrative; Mitchell was calm and stayed in his chair.

“People say, ‘You don’t holler,’” Mitchell said. “I say, ‘What the hell do I have to holler for? He’s doing all the hollering.’”

Chris Vickers ’87 says Whitmore was sometimes hard to read. “Swish,” Vickers said, “is much more touchy-feely, communicative, and direct.”

The give and take continued during games. In the early years, Mitchell urged the head coach to remain calm, go easy on the officials. At one game Whitmore repeated his habit of kicking a chair in frustration at a bad call. This time the game was away and the coaches sat on bleachers. Whitmore kicked, Mitchell said, and the bleacher didn’t give.

“I said, ‘Good. I hope you broke your toe.’ I was never afraid to say things to him that the other young coaches would not. We got along handsomely.”

For decades the pair conferred on everything from recruiting to personnel to game strategy. They traveled New England and beyond and stayed in touch with an always-growing network of former players. Vickers said he counts the pair among his best friends.

And, at the end of the day, the end of the game, at the end of a 40-year association, Whitmore could always turn to Mitchell and vice versa.

“He’s amazing,” Whitmore said. “John Mitchell is the constant.”
found talent where other people didn’t,” said Hancock. “He but also the players whose talent may not have been obvious to other coaches. “He was able to lure to Colby profile players he was able to recruit.”

Hancock said the approach may have cost Colby the ECAC title when he was playing as a freshman, as Whitmore, true to his principles, refused to map out the final minutes of the game for his players. Left to figure things out, the players came up short.

“The difference is he was preparing us for the rest of our lives versus, ‘Here’s your answer, go do it,’” Hancock said. “There is a big difference in that in terms of how you approach the rest of your life. All of us who played for him would probably attribute a lot of our ability to solve complex problems to playing for him for four years. I know I do.”

Colby did go on to win the ECAC title when Hancock was a senior.

Former players also praise Whitmore’s recruiting successes, not only for the high-profile players he was able to lure to Colby but also the players whose talent may not have been obvious to other coaches. “He found talent where other people didn’t,” said Chris Vickers ’87. “If you look back, yes, Harland Storey [’85] was heavily recruited, becomes an All-American, and Matt Hancock, he was recruited. But Whit got a key player every year who could continue to drive the program.”

Said Mitchell, Whitmore’s career-long assistant, of the thousands of recruiting trips for Colby: “You don’t necessarily go to see the high scorer. You go to see the guy who will fit into the plan.”

There was a plan, and it was driven both by Whitmore’s knowledge of and love for the game (his players say his emphasis on fundamentals is legendary), and also by his fierce will to compete and his insistence that Colby players learn to do the same: “Teaching them to compete, and to understand the value of competing at the highest level,” Whitmore said. “And finding out what that would mean for them within their own growth process so that they could find out that they could compete on any level—this is the thing that really was important for me, and it was something that, maybe, I was overzealous in my younger years.”

In the early years chairs occasionally flew on the sideline during games. Even shoes. Whitmore was called for a few technical fouls. Said Mitchell of the young Whitmore, “During the games he was a little bit too emotional.”

But Whitmore calmed himself and, according to Mitchell, hadn’t had a technical foul in 15 years.

Still, Mitchell said Whitmore’s flamboyant game presence (lobster-print trousers, madras sports coats, stalking the sidelines like a prowling panther) of the early years was his trademark, along with his unflagging work ethic, meticulous organization (“You’d think he went to a Jesuit school,” Mitchell said. Whitmore graduated from Bowdoin.), and an understanding of the Colby student-athlete. Players came to Whitmore to ask

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**Damien Strahorn Returns to Coach the Mules**

Damien Strahorn ’02, who played under basketball coach Dick Whitmore and was his assistant, was named new head coach of the Colby men’s basketball team.

Strahorn was head coach at Plymouth State University this past season and an assistant coach for four years at Columbia University.

“Damien has the right mix of terrific basketball knowledge and high-level recruiting experience that we need,” said Harold Alfond Director of Athletics Marcella Zalot, “combined with his knowledge of the traditions and history of the men’s basketball program at Colby.”

Strahorn pointed to Whitmore’s wins and multiple titles and the impact he’s had on hundreds of former players. “I’m very honored and humbled to be taking over for him,” he said.

Taking over a Plymouth State team with just one returning starter, Strahorn helped the Panthers to a sixth-place finish last year. Strahorn was at Columbia for four years under then-head coach Joe Jones, who is now associate head coach at Boston College.

Strahorn started at Columbia as a third assistant and worked up to Jones’s top assistant. With Strahorn and Jones, the team tied the university’s record for most wins in a season with a 16-12 record in 2006-07.
Legacy fund intended to pass on “all ... that Whit embodied”

Jim Crook ’78 was just 13 when he first met Dick Whitmore at basketball camp in Casco, Maine. “I came to Colby because of Whit,” Crook said.

He played for Whitmore at Colby, grew closer to his coach after graduation, and for decades saw the effect the coach and mentor had on generations of Colby athletes. When Whitmore announced his retirement, Crook and other basketball alumni—Matt Hancock ’90, Chris Vickers ’87, and Chad Higgins ’97—set out “to make sure that we have the best opportunity to give every athlete going forward what we got.”

The result is the Whitmore Legacy Fund, established with money raised by basketball alumni and others. “In thirty days we raised a million-one,” Crook said, speaking at Whitmore’s retirement celebration in June. “And that number is stunted because we didn’t want him to find out about it.”

Commemorated by the renaming of the court as the Whitmore-Mitchell Basketball Court, the fund will be spent over seven years, overseen by Alfond Athletic Director Marcella Zalot. At its present level, the fund would provide $150,000 each year to supplement the regular athletics budget.

“If you take the Alfond Foundation gift and the Dick Whitmore Legacy Fund, the impact will be huge,” Zalot said. She said the money will be used to support assistant coaches, education programs for athletes and coaches, and leadership training for captains, among other areas.

The effort will not be limited to basketball any more than Whitmore, former Colby athletic director, limited his focus to only basketball. “He’s way more than Mr. Basketball at Colby,” Crook said. “He’s Colby Athletics to a lot of guys.”

Crook said he believes the end result will be more competitive sports programs and student athletes who have positive experiences at Colby—and beyond. “He instilled in his players the desire to compete,” Crook said. “The values of being orga-