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Mules on the Move

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Whitmore Notches 500th Win

'Whit' builds a legacy; protégés fill coaching ranks

By Patrick McBride '97

The Colby men's basketball team was on the road, 300 miles from home, but you wouldn't have known by the noise in the stands. At Wesleyan, the Mules and head basketball coach Dick Whitmore drew a crowd of alumni, former players and Colby parents and friends. It was a typical turnout for the Mules and head basketball coach, who recently capped his 30-year career with his 500th win. But on that day it was clear that the Whitmore influence extends far beyond the record books.

At the Colby bench, Whitmore was flanked by Roy Dow '84 and Thomas "TJ" Maines '95. Both Dow and Maines played for "Whit," as he is affectionately known by Colby friends, and have since joined his coaching staff. Against the scorers' table from Whitmore stood Wesleyan head coach Gerry McDowell '76, a former player and assistant under Whitmore. With McDowell were his assistants, Dave McLachlin '97 and John Hebert '97, also former Colby standouts.

A one-time Colby basketball manager, John Orefice '75, came from New York to see the Mules' demonstrative and flamboyant head coach once again. "It was a spiritual experience to see him in his familiar positions with those unforgettable gestures and facial expressions," Orefice said. "It was as if I could relive all those great years, if only for a moment.

For Whitmore they have been great years, both in terms of winning on the court and winning the respect and admiration of hundreds of Colby basketball players. The 500th win, notched January 27 at Colby against the University of Maine at Farmington, places Whitmore in the top 20 of winningest coaches in Division III in the nation. But fittingly, he said one of the pleasures of reaching the 500-win mark was the occasion to look back on the people he has worked with for those three decades.

"The win gave me much more of a chance to reflect on the people who have made it happen," said Whitmore. "The people at Colby have been wonderful to work with and have made it such a pleasure to coach here. Throughout my career, we have never stopped getting good players into the program."

A key to that has been the network he has fostered through former players—one that has allowed Whitmore and his staff to continually attract the top players to the Colby program. Former Colby players say their loyalty to their former coach and the Colby program doesn't diminish with passing years. "There is an amazing bond between everyone who has played for him," said McLachlin, the Wesleyan assistant coach.

The bond forms because Whitmore stresses the importance of the individual as a successful person rather than just as a successful athlete. And even the lessons Whitmore imparts as he presses for excellence on the basketball court carry over into everyday life. Orefice, who teaches high school English and theater, said he uses Whitmore as a model for the players he directs school plays. "It was his passion for basketball—and his commitment to excellence," Orefice said. "He always gets the most out of his kids because they are inspired by his energy and his quixotic recklessness in the pursuit of victory."

Or as Maines put it, "After four years you'll run through a wall for him."

But passion alone doesn't produce victories. Maines said he came back to coach at Colby with Whitmore because he wanted to learn as much as possible from a master of the game. "Defensively, he's as good as it gets," he said. "His attention to detail is unbelievable."

Attention to the game, yes. Attention to himself, no.

A dinner at Colby in February honoring his 500th win left him uncomfortable because he felt the honor should be shared, Whitmore said. But 225 people gathered for the event, including Chris Vickers '87, the master of ceremonies, and assistant coach Dow. Dow broke the news of an ongoing fund-raising effort in Whitmore's honor, with proceeds to be used for new office/locker room space for men's and women's basketball or an endowment for men's and women's basketball. According to Maines, there has been a 100 percent donor response from the players from the last seven years.

"The 100 percent participation is a testament to the respect and loyalty he has earned from his players," said Maines. "They all want to give something back to Coach Whitmore for all he has done for them."

As he heads into his fourth decade as head coach at Colby, Whitmore is the same coach he was back in 1970, albeit a bit more reserved. As driven as he was when he began coaching, Whitmore has managed to balance his roles as athletic director, head coach, father and husband. "I find something that stimulates me everyday," he said. "It's always interesting to see where today's stimulus will come from. The relationships, the coaching, the success are as rewarding as ever. I also enjoy the trust and mutual respect as much as anything else."

Buffy L. Clifford, assistant director of Alumni Relations, contributed to this article.
In January, during the heart of the squash season, the Colby men's team reached an all-time high-water mark when it was ranked 10th in the nation by the National Intercollegiate Squash Racquets Association (NISRA). Head coach Fred Brussels says this is especially impressive considering that three of his top 10 players, including co-captain Tom Reynolds '00 (Pittsburgh, Pa.), never played squash before coming to Colby. "Everyone worked hard this season and our ranking showed it," said Brussels.

This year the White Mules won the Colby-Bates-Bowdoin squash title for the second time in three years, and co-captain Preston Amos '01 (Ladue, Mo.) won the individual title. The team ended the regular season with a 13-5 record and a ranking of 11th in the country.

Brussels, in his fourth year as the Colby head coach, is part of the reason for the team's recent success. Prior to his coaching, the highest the team had been ranked was 17th. Brussels routinely schedules matches against the best teams in the country. The team's five regular-season losses came against Harvard, Cornell, Brown, Dartmouth and Yale—all top 10 teams.

Colby entered team nationals held at Yale University in February with the number three seed in the “B” flight of nationals, up one flight from 1998-99. The 38 collegiate teams are seeded by record into five divisions. The Mules initially were up three wins to one against Navy in their first round contest but ultimately lost 4-5. The final two losses came from matches that lasted the full five games. "I think we just ran out of steam," said Brussels. A tough 3-6 loss to the University of Pennsylvania and a 5-4 win against MIT left Colby with a final national ranking of 15 and a 14-7 record.

"Team nationals was a good experience, but a little disappointing," said Amos. "Although we didn't win our first two matches as we would have liked to, finishing with a win was a nice way to end the season," he said of the MIT match.

Amos and Rahul Singh '03 (Noida, India), the top two players on the team, both competed in the individual national tournament in March at Williams College. They'll also both return to the team next year. Singh, a past member of the Indian Junior National Team, says that in his eight years of competitive squash, this year's Colby men's team was one of the most dedicated and committed teams he ever has played on.

"Our next target is to break into the top 10 next year," said Singh.

—Alicia Nemeccolo MacLeay '97