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BY AMANDA CREASEY ON FEBRUARY 5, 2019

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Blankenbecler hoists a state championship trophy.

Michael Blankenbecler, James River High School's boys volleyball coach, never expected to become a coach, much less have three state championships tucked comfortably under his belt within the first five seasons of his career.

In fact, Blankenbecler's earliest athletic endeavors didn't involve volleyball at all, but baseball and basketball, sports he began playing when he was about 9.

"There aren't many opportunities to play volleyball that young," Blankenbecler explained.

His first introduction to volleyball came through his parents and aunt, who played on a co-ed team their church formed. He recalls playing games with the other parent-athletes' children in the adjacent gym while their parents competed.

"As I got a little older, I would practice hitting the volleyball around and watch some of the game," he said.

While Blankenbecler has always enjoyed basketball and baseball, when he began playing volleyball, he knew he'd found his sport.

"There is something about the energy level that volleyball has that's very important to me. Volleyball strategy is pretty complex, and since players have to rotate around each point, it's very different," he explained.

Although a natural athlete, Blankenbecler never considered himself a leader during his early years as a volleyball player.

"As a student-athlete in middle school and high school, I was very shy and quiet. I didn't have the type of personality to really be a traditional leader on teams," Blankenbecler said. The adults, teammates and mentors in his life eventually convinced him otherwise.

By his sophomore year at Thomas Dale High School, he was a starting setter, and the team succeeded in reaching the state championship for the first time in the school's history.

"That year's senior class had a lot of great players and leaders to learn from," Blankenbecler said.

The following year, Blankenbecler's coach chose him to be team captain and floor captain. "The floor captain is the only player allowed to talk to the refs during the games," Blankenbecler explained.

As a senior, Blankenbecler said he would have "more comfortably taken a backseat and just played a game I love," but his ability to lead was gradually growing as strong as his ability to play, and his coach pushed him to become a leader. "One of the biggest lessons I learned in high school was the foundation of what it meant to be a leader."

The learning didn't stop when he reached Radford University, where he realized his love of coaching while working as a student assistant coach for the women's volleyball team during the 2012 and 2013 seasons.

Radford was "the first place I got to see high-level volleyball coaching. The three coaches at Radford really ignited my love for the coaching side."

Blankenbecler has learned many lessons from his coaching career as well.

"Just because you may be good at a sport doesn't mean you know how to coach someone else to get better. You have to really learn how to break down the parts of volleyball and make it easier for people from any sport background to understand," he said.

Many of the players on his team come to him new to the sport. To help them succeed, he tries to relate volleyball skills to other sports the students may have played, and his efforts have paid off.

Despite his successful coaching, Blankenbecler finds he feels more anxious as a coach than he did as a player, largely because he is giving the game over to his players and not playing himself.

"As a player, I was always confident in the skills I had. I wasn't ever nervous. But as a coach, I just want my players to play the best they can. There are big moments when they need to come through for their teammates, and I have found I have more anxious feelings knowing I, as the coach, can't touch the ball."

Aside from nerves, the most difficult aspect of coaching for Blankenbecler is “determining how each team needs to be pushed to achieve the best they can. Every team I have coached has had a different personality.”

The challenges, though, make the role rewarding. He plays a part in making moments and memories that his athletes will carry with them for a lifetime. He knows from experience. “I can still vividly remember what happened in 2008 for the last point at Thomas Dale,” he said. “The three teams that I have won with at James River will never forget the moments that led to winning the last point. There are not many moments for a high school athlete that [he] will remember forever, so it’s rewarding knowing that those players’ hard work paid off.”

Blankenbecler’s success as a coach has also been rewarding.

“Just winning one state championship in a coaching career is a great accomplishment. I already had one as a player, so winning one as coach as well would be great. Never did I expect to win like we have so far.”

The team’s most recent championship was special in two ways.

First, “the juniors and seniors on this team were all on JV when we won in 2015 and 2016. It was awesome to see them achieve the same thing as the previous year.”

Second, it took him back to his days as a varsity player at Thomas Dale. “We beat Thomas Dale in the finals. It was very emotionally impactful to play and beat the school that I graduated from.”

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