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Vitals

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'DOG DAYS

20 seasons
8 state titles
713 victories

20 years ago this month, Jamie Plunkett agreed to lead Meadville's hockey program. It was the start of a career that has redefined scholastic success.

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Bulldog Benchmark

Jamie Plunkett has left his indelible stamp on the Meadville hockey program. After 20 seasons of shaping the Bulldogs into one of the state's elite programs, Plunkett has proved he owns a blueprint for coaching success.

The most significant figure on Jamie Plunkett's coaching resume isn't the most obvious.

It's not the eight state championships his Meadville Bulldog hockey program has won, or the record five straight from 1992 to 1996.

It's not the 713 career victories, thought to be the second-most coaching wins in U.S. high school hockey history. No, 20 is the number that should stand out. Twenty years as coach of a program that unfailingly is among the state's elite.

Plunkett hired on in May 1986, surely one of the most serendipitous coaching moves in northwestern Pennsylvania sports history. He'd been coaching a Midget house league team at DeArment Arena after a short stint with the club team at Allegheny College, where he was and remains head athletic trainer.

The Bulldogs went 19-3-2 and won a state title that first season. They've lost exactly 11 playoff games since.

With few exceptions, coaches don't coach with any one high school for 20 years. Especially not a coach whose team wins state titles in seven of his first 10 seasons, who never has had a losing record, and who appears to be the winningest high school coach, in any sport, in state history.

Plunkett's thought about calling it quits, the first time in the middle of that great championship streak.

He met with the Pittsburgh Penguins when their athletic trainer position came open in the early 1990s. It's a decision he didn't have to make; the Penguins rehired a former trainer, and Plunkett was happily back on the Bulldog bench. Elsewhere in today's Varsity, Plunkett says he considered stepping down after the 2003 championship season.

"But we had a great group of kids coming back and I really wasn't ready (to resign)," he told Times-News staff writer Mike Copper. "I didn't want to be one of these coaches that steps aside, then comes back two years later."

He says he'll evaluate again after this coming season, making good on a promise to youngest daughter Annie to stay through her senior year at Meadville Area Senior High School. "Definitely one more year. After that, I'll see how I feel."

Satisfied, hopefully. What others see in his two decades in Meadville:

- Plunkett locked down ice time at DeArment Arena, making practice a priority. The team's players, parents and supporters raised money for several years for construction of a pro-style dressing room in whose stalls the youngest players now dream of one day hanging their sweaters. Most of Meadville's opponents had no such ice-time or home-ice advantage, and many remain nomadic today. The sense of ownership that's developed in players and fans has made the House of Chills one of the toughest road venues in the state, in any sport.

- He brought pro, junior and college sensibilities to a high school club program that feasted on the dedication those sensibilities instilled and required. The Bulldogs traveled to face the best competition; they played 50, even 60 games some seasons; they made dry-land training in August as important as skating drills in December. Plunkett's best teams haven't been just good, but feared. From 1986 to 1995, the Bulldogs never lost more than eight games, and averaged just six losses per season.
- Every move speaks to Plunkett's lead role in a cultural shift in western Pennsylvania hockey. Pittsburgh-area teams, whose officials dominated the sport's governing body, all but refused to acknowledge the arrival of Meadville's program despite evidence it was in place to stay as early as the late 1980s. By the time Meadville was grudgingly accepted as an equal, the Bulldogs were anything but; the southwestern quarter of the state spent the mid-90s playing catch-up - largely following Plunkett's blueprint - as the Bulldogs hoisted the Pennsylvania Cup five straight years.

If Plunkett were just concerned with wins, he'd be a success.

But his success isn't found only in wins, titles and records.

His players have grown up under his watch, the sons of his friends and neighbors.

He's worked their skate blades dull, and they have the gold medals and golden memories to show for it.

Some have gone on to play in college, or tried their luck in the minors. Others have returned to Plunkett in new guises - as assistant coaches, as assistant trainer at Allegheny, with families of their own.

And Meadville's sports fans, whose winters have been given to basketball and wrestling for so long, have gladly learned how to make DeArment Arena warm for the home team, icy for the visitors.

None of that happens in just a few whirlwind seasons.

For the very fortunate communities, it'll take at least 20.

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Q & A: with Meadville Hockey Coach Jamie Plunkett

Meadville hired you in May 1986. Did you think you would coach there for 20 years?

Absolutely not. I went into it with my eyes kind of closed. I had no idea what I was getting into. I had coached Allegheny (College's) team for about a year and a half. I was a little frustrated because of the lack of commitment there, so I stepped aside. I was approached by a couple gentlemen in town to (coach Meadville). I thought, 'Well, I'll do this,' never thinking that 20 years later I'd still be doing it.

Could you have envisioned eight state championships in that time?

I really had no idea where we stood in terms of talent or what level of hockey was around. The longer I got into it I looked around and realized that Cleveland and Buffalo (teams) were light years ahead of Pittsburgh (teams). I was fortunate enough to make a few contacts and was able to do some things scheduling-wise. We were able to put together a pretty competitive schedule, which was good for our kids. At that time around this area, it wasn't as good as it is today.

Was it more like a club sport in the region than it is now?

Yes. I think the lack of ice time was the biggest reason. There's probably five times the number of (rinks) available today.

When I first started, the only rinks you had in Erie were (JMC Ice Arena) at the zoo and Tullio Arena. Now you've got the Igloo Ice Arena and the Mercyhurst Ice Center. You've doubled there and in Pittsburgh I bet there's over 25 to 30 (rinks). When I started, I think they had six or seven. Now I think they've passed Cleveland. I really had no idea what kind of level (of play) it was going to be. The first year we were fortunate enough to win the state championship and that created a lot of interest.

At the same time, you also had Mario Lemieux's career taking off (with the Pittsburgh Penguins). That made for a keen interest in the sport just because of what Lemieux was bringing to western Pennsylvania.

So you credit Lemieux with having the biggest influence?

I had a conversation with somebody about this a year or two ago. Bobby Orr arrived in New England (with the Boston Bruins) in 1966. He did to New England what Lemieux has done to western Pennsylvania. He created an interest to the point where more (rinks where needed).

Prior to Mario, a young athlete maybe took up another sport. Now you have kids choosing (hockey) as their number one sport. I think you're going to see the same scenario revitalized with (Sidney) Crosby. It's almost the same sort of thing happening 20 years later.

What has been your most satisfying moment with the Bulldogs?

Boy, that's a tough one. I'm always reluctant to say one group over another just because I live in a small town. I usually take the political way and say they're like your children. You love them all, but for different reasons.

Probably the one that continues to stand out was in 1989. Our kids were not allowed to try out for Team Pittsburgh (of the former Tri-State Area Hockey Association) even though we belonged to TAHA.

We beat Team Pittsburgh (6-5 in the Class AAA final) as time expired. I think that legitimized our program a little bit because the next year, our kids were eligible for Team Pittsburgh.

That was a watershed moment because we also won the (AAA) state championship for the first time. People realized you couldn't exclude our kids from (TAHA).

Who were your role models, hockey or otherwise?

My dad (Doug) coached me for several years. When you spend that much time driving to and from rinks with your father for several years, he was one. From a coaching standpoint later in life, although his coaching tactics came under scrutiny, I've always admired Scotty Bowman and Barry Smith. I've known Barry from all the way back in my days at Ithaca (N.Y.) when I was at Cornell (University). Barry has come into Meadville and shared his experiences with our players. That's been a huge benefit.

Has your coaching style changed since you started?

I think it has. You have to adapt to the kind of style that's in vogue, I guess.

I grew up in an era where it was pretty much all offense. Scores of 7-5 were not uncommon. Then you saw this switch over to low-scoring games with the (neutral-zone) trap, which wasn't my preference. I think the pool of players around you dictates your style. There's some things you just can't do with certain teams.

I'm kind of like a pirate in that I (steal) from every coach I see and kind of incorporate it into my own personality.

Has it been tough to constantly adapt your coaching style to different teams or situations?

No. I remember the year Bob Johnson coached the Penguins and Barry Smith was his assistant. Bob could find a positive thing in the most miserable situation. I kept thinking I should be more like that, but I couldn't. I could not be as he was because he was one of a kind.

Some things work with certain players. In the end, you have to be yourself because the kids see through it if you try to be something you're not.

Do you hear from your former players, especially the ones from the 1980s?

Some of them still live in town. We have an alumni game in the winter and we also have a golf outing. I still see some kids that go back to my first team.

The high school hockey season is longer than most high school seasons. You also work at Allegheny College. Has it been tough to balance the two with your family?

Your family is the one that is the one that gets cheated the most.

Fortunately, my wife (Sue) and daughters (Joan and Ann) are hockey fans. The girls have classmates that have played on their respective hockey teams, so they also go through the emotional roller coaster of a long season.

Of the three, hockey, your work and the family, the family is the one that gets cheated.

That's the main reason why you see so many guys (resign) because they want to spend more time with their family.

I can identify with that their respective teams, so they because there are stretches during a season where I see my players more than I see my own kids. You're able to catch up in the offseason, but sometimes, that's a little tough.

If you talk to the (Cathedral) Prep people and the McDowell people, they'll also tell you a hockey team becomes a family.

How many more years do you see yourself coaching?

In 2003 (Meadville's last championship season), I thought that would be the best time to step aside. But we had a great group of kids coming back and I really wasn't ready (to resign).

I made a promise to my youngest daughter that I would stay through her senior year, which will be next year. I'll evaluate it at that time. I still enjoy the practices and all the camaraderie that goes along with the players and the coaches. We've got a lot of great parents and a great board that make things a lot easier than what I hear from a lot of my counterparts.

I don't want to cheat the kids and go through the motions. I've heard guys say they don't have the desire anymore. When it gets to that point, you have to be fair to the kids and step aside.

Definitely one more year. After that, I'll see how I feel.

-Mike Copper