

Gannon is coach of the year

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On the bottom floor of Tony Gannon's Clinton home is a room of memorabilia. There are a few copies of "Ford's History of Clinton," autographed baseball cards and pictures, and an old downs marker from Fuller Field. But there are also pictures of Gannon's teams: The Gaels teams on which he played at Clinton High School, and the boys' basketball teams he coached to victory.

Gannon, 54, has been named the 2010 Massachusetts Basketball Coaches Association's Coach of the Year, for the Central Mass Area Boys Basketball Division II.

Given annually, the award honors the top coaches for boys and girls sports in each of the four state divisions - north, south, central and west.

"When you coach, that's not what you think, 'someday I'll win an award,'" Gannon said.

"It's humbling because you are selected by other coaches and it's a testimony to the kids and to Bob Bonci, my assistant coach. You'd like to share it. No one individual is the reason why a group is successful."

Coaching career Gannon, CHS Class of 1974, has been coaching boys' basketball at his alma mater for 23 years. He has also been an assistant football coach for the last 20 years and the freshman baseball coach for 17. In addition to that, he teaches physical education and health.

"We have had a lot of good moments," he said. "Beating Sutton by one point in the Clark Tourney, seeing Justin Folger score his 1,000th point, beating Uxbridge last year down there.

That was big."

There have also been moments of heartbreak.

"I still think about this - probably because it's so fresh in my mind - but I still think about losing at the buzzer last year to Millbury," he said. "Just coming back into the locker room after that, and seeing how hard the boys took it."

"It's gone by so fast," he added. "I remember so many players. Sean Hauver was the best kid when he didn't have the ball, he'd do anything legal to get it. There was Jeremy Frisch and Mark Hall and Justin Folger. and Alvin Mayard, last year's captain, who got everyone together during the summer."

He acknowledges times have changed, however. Gone are the days when attending practice was an absolute requirement for playing time.

Gannon excuses players when they have to work and has allowed younger siblings to be at practices if necessary.

Success is a partnership Gannon also credits his assistant coach, Bob Bonci, with the success of their team.

"Bonci and I have been together for 12 years," he said.

"We play off one another and we have a good time. We're almost like co-coaches. I've been lucky to have had a lot of good assistant coaches."

Gannon said he has loved coaching in Clinton.

"We like to have fun," he said. "It's a good learning experience for the kids - you learn to win and lose gracefully.

It's part of your education.

Varsity is the one level where you play to win, but we keep things in perspective."

To that end, Gannon doesn't cut players from his teams.

"I let them make their own decisions," he said. "I tell them they probably won't get much playing time, but they are welcome to stay on the team. We meet weekly and go over how they have improved and what they need to work on."

A life of sports Every young athlete aspires to play professional sports, and Gannon said he was no exception. He was a three-sport athlete at Clinton High in the early 70s and also had the opportunity to play semipro baseball in Canada and semi-pro football in Rome.

As a college student, Gannon was invited to try out for a team in Bathurst, New Brunswick.

"There were supposed to be six of us trying out," he said.

"One of them was Terry Francona, but he got drafted, so there were only five of us. I got picked, and it was a lot of fun, the most fun I've ever had."

Gannon ended up playing in Rome almost by accident - a friend was headed to Italy to play for the "Grizzlies Roma" team. Gannon told him, half in jest that if anything happened to any of the players to give him a call.

"I was teaching in Rutland, and he called," Gannon said. "I went in and told the principal on a Tuesday, spent the day in Boston getting my passport on Wednesday, and flew out on Thursday."

Gannon played cornerback safety for two years and ended up as a player/coach as well.

"I was having fun, but after two years it was enough," he said. "Your body starts to break down."

Gannon noted he has played for great coaches himself and said that Bill Gosselin, then a guidance counselor at CHS and the dad of a childhood friend, was a big influence.

"He brought us to the games and he was a baseball coach," Gannon recalled. "I can still remember the rosters, and the numbers of some of the high school players. First I wanted to play for Clinton, and then wanted to coach. My mother encouraged me, and here am, I'm almost ready to retire."

It's been a lot of fun; I wouldn't change anything."

Family values Gannon was quick to give much credit to his wife, Sheryl, for taking over when he is occupied with coaching duties.

If there are any secrets to being a successful coach, Gannon said he learned an important philosophy from one of his coaches, Owen Kilcoyne.

"You discipline every kid as if he was your own, and you treat every kid like you want a coach to treat yours," he said

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