

Legendary high school coach Ed Kershner is now fighting for a new kidney | Commentary

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Ed Kershner has won more high school basketball games than anyone else in the state of Florida, but his biggest victory right now would be a new kidney. (Stephen M. Dowell / Orlando Sentinel)

Few coaches have won more games and helped more kids than Ed Kershner. Few coaches have a more giving, loving heart.

If only he had a good, functioning kidney.

If only he didn't have to spend 10 hours a day locked to a dialysis machine to decontaminate from the deadly toxins in his blood.

"There are no days off," Kershner says of his marathon dialysis sessions. "You have to do it every day. Every single day." Every single day.

Hour after hour. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year.

No days off.

Sounds sort of like being a high school coach, which Kershner was for 48 years (45 as a head coach), two state championships and 901 victories — the most of any boys basketball coach in Florida high school history.

For nearly half a century, Kershner was not only a high school coach; he was a mentor, a guidance counselor, a taxi service, an equipment man, a team trainer and a surrogate father to hundreds of teenage boys.

Through the decades, he became one of those men who was never, ever identified by his first name. You see, he is not “Ed” Kershner anymore; he is simply “Coach” Kershner to so many who love, admire and respect him. And, if you ask me, “coach” is a more noble title than any king or queen.

I’ve always admired high school coaches who dedicate their lives to molding and mentoring other people’s kids. Especially in Florida, where high school coaches get a stipend that pays them far less than minimum wage for the time they put in. It’s why many of the top high school football coaches leave Florida for lucrative jobs in Alabama, Texas or Georgia.

I’ve written before about one of my own high school coaches, Dave Branch, whose then-wife showed up at a baseball practice one day and argued with her husband shortly before they divorced. The argument ended with her saying, “Why don’t you spend more time with your kid and less time with these kids?”

Ouch.

I once told the late, great Corky Rogers, the winningest high school football coach in state history, the story about coach Branch, and Corky nodded his head knowingly. “That story makes me cringe because we’ve all been guilty of it,” Corky said. “It’s a hazard of the coaching profession.”

Being a high school coach isn’t a profession; it’s a passion and a commitment and a devotion that consumed Kershner at a young age. He grew up in Indiana, where his mother was a high school girls basketball coach and his father was a high school basketball official.

“In Indiana, you’d go to church on Sunday and to the gym every other day of the week,” Kershner says and laughs. He started his head-coaching career in 1971 at Southern Wells High School — a bumpkin, backwoods outpost in rural Indiana. The only reason he got the job, he says, is because nobody else wanted it.

“It was in the middle of nowhere,” Kershner recalls. “There was no city; there was no post office; there was nothing really except a high school that had never won more than two games in a season. My philosophy as a coach has always been that the program isn’t what it is; it’s what we’re going to make it. I believed in myself enough to think I could make a difference.”

He won nine games that first season and he has been making a difference ever since. He spent his first 12 years coaching in Indiana and then in 1980 moved to Florida, where he won his first state title with the legendary 37-0 Kissimmee Osceola team of 1982-83 and his second at Oviedo in 2014.

He coached at Oviedo until he was 75 years old and won four consecutive district titles and made three trips to the state tournament in his final six years. "I loved coaching my last game as much as I loved coaching my first game," Kershner says.

He didn't retire because of age; he retired because of health. Four years ago, his kidneys began to fail. He started getting tired and groggy and sick from all the toxins in his body. Finally, in November he went into the hospital for surgery and was told daily dialysis would be necessary.

He is on a long waiting list for a new kidney and dutifully hooks himself up to a portable home dialysis machine for 10 hours each day.

"I'm just blessed that I feel better and am still able to do some of the things I love to do," he says. "People always talk about how many games I won. Yes, I won a lot of games, but I made a lot of friends and built a lot of relationships along the way. I'll take the friends and relationships over the wins any day."

Even now, at age 79, Kershner is doing what he can to help grow youth basketball in the state. He co-founded the Florida Association of Basketball Coaches and still remains active in that organization and many others. "I just love the game of basketball and all it's given me, and I want to give back as much as I can while I can," he says. "I believe it's not what somebody gives you; it's what you give back. I've always tried to be a giver and not a taker."

Just this once, though, wouldn't it be great if Coach Kershner became a taker of something he desperately needs? For a man who has won more games than any boys basketball coach in state history, getting a new kidney would be the biggest victory of his life.

For information on how to get screened to see if you are a viable transplant candidate please contact the Halifax Transplant Center, 386 425 4650