Getting recruited by Coach K was just start of story for David Couch who focused on Internet for schools

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By Ron Daley
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Johnson County's Paintsville has an amazing athletic tradition with the likes of major lead baseball player Johnny LeMaster, UK basketball player John Pelphrey, and UK football greats Joey Couch and Kash Daniels. It is also home of country-western music star Chris Stapleton with Loretta Lynn and Crystal Gayle just down the road from Butcher Hollow.

There's another less-recognized excellent athlete, too, who has built on strong traditions in Johnson County to help the Commonwealth be a leader in K-12 education and technology.

The famed Mike Krzyzewski, now Coach K at Duke, paid a recruiting visit to Johnson County when he was head basketball coach of West Point. The student-athlete was playing for Johnson Central High School. The memorable visit started with a couple of locals having fun sending him over some challenging hollow roads when he asked for directions.

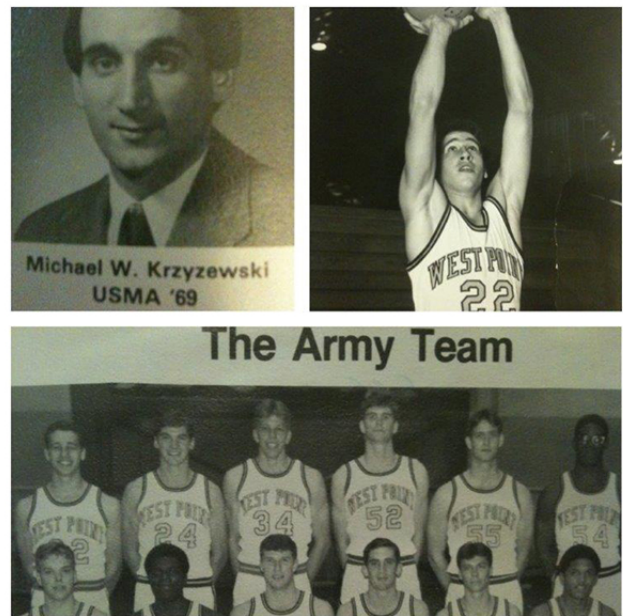When Coach K knocked on the door and stepped inside, he was

brought to his knees by the recruit's younger brother, Joey, 12, unexpectedly running down a hallway to leap on his back. Coach K landed David Couch for West Point, and David forever kidded his brother that any back issues of Coach K's could be traced to that day.

David Couch with Coach K and the West Point team (Photo provided)

Couch had a distinguished career at the United States Military Academy at West Point and for eight years in the U.S. Army in a variety of leadership positions.

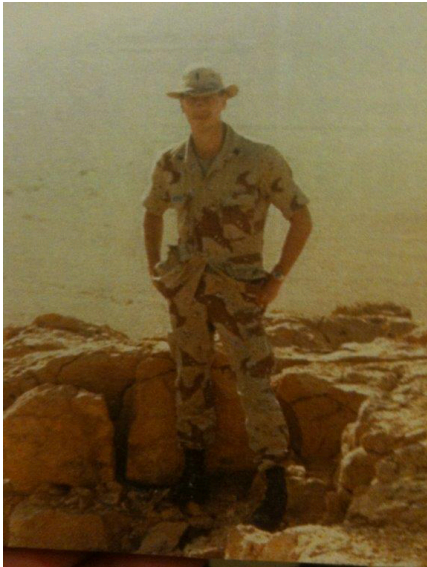But is was his family's education tradition that influenced his later decisions.

Couch's mother, Jane Calhoun Couch, is beloved and respected by so many of the students she prepared for a good run and go at life. She was Kentucky's PTA School Counselor of the Year and an all-time favorite teacher/counselor/leader of many Johnson County students, Couch said — including himself.

"After Operation Desert Storm ended, my mom recruited me to leave the military and return to Kentucky to be part of an initiative that had the primary mission to significantly change Kentucky's position in Kentucky K-12 and economically," Couch says. "This initiative, the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA)) had a technology component called the Kentucky Education Technology System (KETS) that required

equity of access for all Kentucky K–12 students. I was fortunate enough to be selected to be one of the leaders of that initiative and have been doing it ever since KETS was birthed in 1992."

Couch in U.S. Army uniform during Desert Storm (Photo provided)

One of Couch's jobs in the Army prepared him for the technology leadership roles he assumed for the Kentucky Department of Education. As the Army's Director, Tactical Software Division, his team of soldiers and civilians developed, deployed and maintained 35 different major intelligence-gathering/analysis systems (300,000 total units) to provide the opportunity for leaders to make better strategic and tactical decisions, including those used successfully during Operation Desert Storm.

Couch says he has been fortunate to be part of the team which has enabled Kentucky K–12 to be "the" pioneer and "the" national leader in most aspects of education technology over the past 25 years. Couch is the KY K–12 CIO and Associate Commissioner of Education at KY Dept of Education.

Over two decades ago KY K–12 became the first state in the nation to have high-speed Internet access (not dial-up) to 100% of our school districts. Four years ago, in 2015, Kentucky K–12 became the first state to have high quality and high-speed fibered Internet access to 100% of our schools that met the national minimum Internet speed goals of 100 kb per student.

Both historic achievements have enabled Kentucky K–12 to become

"the" national leader in cloud-based computing when not only compared to the K-12s of other states, but to all other government agencies of any state. In order to successfully provide cloud-based computing for nearly every major Kentucky K-12 service for 100% of Kentucky K-12's district offices and schools, Internet services must not be just available but must be stable/reliable and capable, Couch points out.

Kentucky K-12 also has "the" largest and "the" best [Student Technology Leadership Program](#) (STLP) in the nation that has also maximized the 1995 and 2015 Internet investments in KY K-12.

"This helps us showcase the importance of education technology and leadership skills to Kentucky K-12 student's learning in the classroom, to their community and to Kentucky's future," Couch adds.

Kentucky's K-12 Edtech was nationally highlighted in April for its best practices in equity and quality of Internet access by the State Education Technology Directors' Association.

2019 KY State STLP Champions collage (Photo provided)

Couch explains that the Kentucky K-12 Internet bandwidth and services for our schools are currently 25 times larger than the rest of state government combined, which means since 1995 these Internet services have been able to grow/scale as the need has been identified. In order to be

good stewards of taxpayer funds, he states they only buy the amount of Internet services/bandwidth that our school districts show that they have a proven need for.

Couch adds that since 2015, they have appropriately and frugally scaled up the average bandwidth per Kentucky K–12 student from 100 kb per student to 260 kb per Kentucky K–12 student.

"While the new national goal has been raised from 100 kb per student to 1000 kb (aka 1 Mb) per student, we will only steadily and incrementally raise our increase of 260 kb per student toward 1000 kb per student, as districts show they have a proven need."

"In 2015, we were anxious to meet the national goal of 100 kb per student because we had a true immediate need for that amount of Internet bandwidth for every Kentucky K–12 student and for our nation's leading Kentucky K–12 cloud computing–based services (e.g., e-mail, financial mgt, student information system, audio/video instructional content/delivery, etc.). However, we are not anxious or have a true pressing need to provide 1000 kb per Kentucky K–12 student because we only currently need a fourth of that amount and are not going to purchase 1000 kb per student just to meet a national goal while 75% of that capacity and associated expenditures would go unused/wasted."

Couch states he is very proud of Eastern Kentucky's key role in the state's Kentucky K–12 Edtech's historic achievements.

"Back in 1994 and early 1995, Eastern Kentucky was the very first part of the state to have every school district connected via high speed (as it was defined back then) to the Internet and a few years later the very first part of the state to have every one of its schools connected to the

Internet via high speed to the Internet hub that KDE had placed in their district.

David Couch receiving the Proud Mountaineer Award by Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative executive director Dr. Jeff Hawkins on behalf of the 23 KVEC superintendents for his leadership in K-12 education. (Photo provided)

Eastern Kentucky districts were the very first to volunteer to pilot the Kentucky K–12 cloud-based financial management system (i.e., MUNIS) which had all the other Kentucky K-12 school districts follow their lead which made Kentucky K-12 "the" largest cloud-computing financial management system when not only compared to K-12 across the nation, but to any government organization in other states.

Couch notes with pride that mountain school districts have had more Kentucky K-12 student technology leadership program (STLP) state championship teams than any other part of our state.

"By the way, Eastern Kentucky wasn't the first part of the state to have Internet access to every district office and school because we started there first, it was because they wanted it more than other parts of our state," Couch adds.

"Every Kentucky K-12 school district was given the choice of when they would be connected to the Internet by Kentucky Department of Education, and by far the Eastern Kentucky school districts were the most responsive and driven to work with us to get the Internet to each

of their district offices and schools. All Kentucky K-12 school districts were given the choice of when our cloud-computing based financial management system would go in their district, but the eastern districts wanted to be first, so they were the first to pilot it," Couch says.

Couch explains that every Kentucky school district can establish STLP programs and teams at the elementary, middle and high school level and provide opportunities for students to compete against the STLP students from around the state at our annual STLP state championship at Rupp Arena each year.

The Eastern Kentucky native proudly says, "For some reason, we've had more Kentucky K-12 elementary, middle and high school state championship teams from Eastern Kentucky than any other part of the state. All of this has nothing to do with me being from Eastern Kentucky or that two of three directors who have been with me since 1993 are also from Eastern Kentucky. It's because these eastern Kentucky districts wanted it more and made it happen. It's a great story for our students, teachers and school leaders/staff from Eastern Kentucky to be proud."

Kentucky has made significant strides in improving the K-12 educational experience for its students throughout the state since KERA was launched in the early 1990s; this includes the availability, equity, quality and use of modern education technology-enabled resources (e.g., high speed high quality fibered Internet) to help students while in the classroom and also giving them a go run and go at life. Eastern Kentucky and one of its native sons deserve some of the credit.

Editor's note: David Couch's education and family roots originate in

Knott County where his father (EA Couch) and his uncle (Jim Calhoun) played on the memorable 1956 state high school basketball state championship team which included defeating King Kelly Coleman and Wayland in the state semi-final game. EA would go onto the University of Kentucky to play for Coach Rupp and Jim would go onto to play with Oscar Robertson at the University of Cincinnati. EA's wife and Jim's sister, Jane Calhoun Couch, was the cheerleader captain for that 1956 Carr Creek team as well as the school's Valedictorian; she would go onto Berea College on an academic scholarship. Carr Creek had both a great academic and athletic tradition making a run in the national high school basketball championship in 1928. The Associated Press called the efforts by the seven-member team as the "Greatest Sports Story of the 20th Century."

Ron Daley (Twitter @rdaley98) is the strategic partner lead of the Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (KVEC) a consortium of 23 school districts in Eastern Kentucky. He joined the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame in 2017.