

# 'Maybe I'm a builder': 33 years in coaching concludes for Raceland's Johnson

- Zack Klemme | The Daily Independent
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Raceland coach Shawn Johnson celebrates runs scored by the Lady Rams against Boyd County during the seven run third inning of their 16th Region Tournament semifinal game on Monday in Cannonsburg. KEVIN GOLDY | THE DAILY INDEPENDENT

- AP

**RACELAND** Digging through a mental treasure trove of stories from three decades as a coach, Shawn Johnson stumbled across one of his favorites — from a game he didn't coach in and was forbidden from attending.

Johnson had been ejected from Raceland's softball loss to Russell on April 23, 2015, "which then everybody became acutely aware of what the word 'nimrod' means," Johnson said in reference to a name he called umpire Mark Brown during that incident.

The Lady Rams continued 63rd District seeding the next day at Greenup County. Stephanie Johnson was tasked with keeping her suspended husband updated by text message, but as Raceland mounted its comeback from an 8-0 deficit with an 11-run fifth inning, he didn't think the play-by-play was coming in quickly enough.

As it happens, Johnson lives across the street from Greenup County High School. He took drastic measures to satisfy his curiosity.

"I get in my truck, and I'm driving northbound on (U.S.) 23 watching, and then I go down and turn and drive back and watch, and then turn again," Johnson said, "so I'm doing a circle down there to catch bits and pieces of the game."

That got unwieldy, but Johnson was banned from the premises as a term of his suspension, "so I park my truck on the other side of the highway so I'm facing southbound," he said.

"At that time the Greenup dugout was on the first-base side, and I see people in the dugout pointing, and then I see fans start to point. The people at the field are pointing out there toward me ... so I start looking around, thinking something's going on around my truck. You're just wondering if Sasquatch is up there somewhere above my pickup coming down the hill."

Rather, Greenup County's dugout personnel and fans had spotted Johnson and weren't happy about it.

"It caused a lot of stir," Johnson said, but he was within his rights to be where he was. He also wasn't manning binoculars and illicitly calling in plays to Mike Diller, then a Raceland assistant coach who was in charge with Johnson out.

"I think in 2015, I might have had a flip phone," Johnson said.

Anyway, he wasn't there much longer. Johnson's younger daughter, Emily, hit a three-run homer in the top of the seventh to put the Lady Rams up by seven runs in an eventual 16-10 victory.

"I knew then it was over," Johnson said, "so I started my truck and headed on home."

While still exciting from a rivalry perspective, Raceland beating Greenup County — and other significantly bigger opponents — wasn't a rare occurrence.

Johnson continued to build a Lady Rams program that had been to three 16th Region Tournament finals in a five-year span from 2003-07 under former coach Scott Floyd into the No. 1 team in region coaches' polling before the 2019 season, Johnson's last as coach.

That was Johnson's legacy, he said, more so than retiring from Raceland as its all-time wins leader in both softball and boys basketball.

"I guess maybe I'm a builder more than anything else," Johnson said. "When I got out of basketball, the team I left was a really good team. When I got out of golf, the team I left was a really good team, and now when I get out of softball, the team I left is gonna be a preseason No. 1, and they're gonna be that way for two years, with a middle-school program that's stocked full of talent right now.

"The old adage that we've used for years now, 'leave it better than you found it,' I think certainly rings true in the way I've left our programs for the people that followed."

Johnson, an East Carter and Morehead State graduate, broke into coaching as a boys basketball assistant at Hart County in 1986 — during which time he coached future Mr. Basketball Tick Rogers in the elementary football program — before moving on to Raceland the following year.

Until hanging it up after softball season this spring, Johnson had coached there in some capacity ever since.

Johnson was a Rams boys basketball assistant under Ron Reed and Ed Jenkins for six years before sliding into the head coach's spot in 1993. In his 14 years there, Raceland went 212-178 and won two 63rd District titles and three 16th Region All "A" Classic championships.

During that time, Johnson burnished a reputation as a fiery leader. Some years earlier, when he and younger brother Tim played baseball at Morehead State at the same time, they got into a fistfight in the outfield during batting practice when Shawn didn't think Tim was exhibiting sufficient effort, as Tim recalled on "Halftime Prep Talk" in 2017.

Applied more constructively, Johnson's demeanor shaped the Rams into a team known for defensive intensity and execution.

"Shawn was all about defending, rebounding, all the effort plays," said Raceland boys basketball coach Bob Trimble, who returned to his alma mater from Lawrence County to join Johnson's first staff in 1993-94. "That was something you could count on with his teams. They were gonna fight, they were gonna be tough, they were gonna guard, rebound and really play with a lot of energy and a lot of toughness.

"Shawn had an unbelievable energy to keep the intensity level high. As a head coach, that takes a lot of energy, but he was really good at that. Xs and Os, he was good, but his ability to really keep the pressure on and the intensity level where it needed to be was something he did really well."

Moments that stood out to Johnson from that era were Raceland winning its first district title since 1966 in its first season under him and a victory at the buzzer in the first round of the 2001 All "A" state tournament.

Jeremy Stephenson sank a 3-pointer to lift the Rams over Louisville Holy Cross, 51-50.

"The play we ran, we had run that before and we didn't execute it the way we were supposed to, and I about lost my mind," Johnson said of a loss to Greenup County 23 days earlier.

(Following that game, he'd told *The Daily Independent*, "We refuse to do what we were supposed to do offensively," and "This may be the most stubborn team I've ever had.")

The Rams tweaked that play, "so when we ran that in the state tournament, we knew we were gonna win," Johnson said. "We knew Jeremy was gonna hit the shot, and we weren't going for a tie, we were going for the win."

Johnson resigned in 2007 to spend more time with daughters Madison and Emily. As it turned out, they became a good excuse to get back into coaching.

Johnson started the Raceland-Worthington Little League softball program, took over the Lady Rams' golf team in 2010 when Madison was in fifth grade and became Raceland's softball coach in 2012.

In those roles, Johnson coached both of his children.

"As a coach, it was great to be able to spend all my coaching time with them, because I love coaching, and then have the dad time," Johnson said. "Of course, it usually didn't happen until we got home because the ride home, I was still kind of a coach, and that's why Emily always rode in the back seat."

The Lady Rams went 186-106 under Johnson and claimed seven All "A" region titles and three district crowns. They were the state small-school runner-up in 2018.

Johnson's last game was the first unclassified region tournament final he coached in. Raceland fell to Ashland, 12-0, but Johnson doesn't plan to let that put a damper on his career.

"Are there things I would have liked to accomplish?" he asked rhetorically. "Sure, but they're just not that important.

"I tell you why I was able to go out on my own terms, because the number of wins I have doesn't really matter. I could care less how many wins I have. ... I could stay on for two more years and get 60 wins, but to be honest, it doesn't prove anything. I did the best I could do and I've certainly left it in really good shape for the next guy."

Johnson also coached cross country and boys golf at Raceland in the late 1990s and led the Lady Rams on the links to their first All "A" region crown in 2017.

Trimble, who played baseball with Johnson at Morehead State in the 1980s, has also coached several Raceland teams. He leads the Rams boys basketball and golf teams and has also coached tennis and girls hoops.

Former football, girls basketball and baseball coach Randy Vanderhoof, among others, also notably led multiple Rams squads. Johnson embraced that small-school ethos.

"Raceland is such a small school, and everybody knows everybody extremely well," Trimble said. "Once you get here, it's a place you want to stay just because of the family atmosphere."

Johnson, 56, intends to spend the first part of his retirement watching rising Thomas More sophomore Madison play softball and golf. Emily, who graduated this spring, plans to try out to play softball at Northern Kentucky, too.

He also has a plan carved out to occupy his fall evenings.

“Would it sound bad if I thought I might referee middle school girls basketball?” Johnson said, laughing. “I really don’t have any desire to coach anymore, but it would be a chance to work with kids a little bit, help them learn a game and exercise, and you get paid a little bit for it, too.

“I’ve been a head coach for over 20 years, so I’ve had people yell at me before, so fans yelling really wouldn’t be an issue.”

After all, since when has he been worried about that?

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