

One of the most successful coaches in 13th Region history, Mike Jones posted a 613-255 record in 28 seasons as a boys basketball coach in a career that included stops at Cawood, Jackson County, Todd Central, Harlan, Clay County and Harlan County.

Jones, a 1970 Clay County graduate, began his high school coaching career in the 1980-81 season as an assistant under Kirk Chiles at Cawood High School on a team led by Mr. Basketball Phil Cox. The Trojans were regional runner-up in both 1981 and 1983 before Chiles left for Somerset and Jones took over as head coach. In addition to being an assistant with the boys team, Jones was the girls head coach for two years, winning 49 games and two 52nd District titles, including a regional runner-up finish in 1983.

Cawood opened the 1983-84 season with a 67-65 win at home over Harlan on Dec. 3, 1983. Ironically, Harlan was also being led by a new coach who had numerous battles with Jones through the years. Billy Hicks, who went on to coach at Corbin and then Scott County, started his career at Evarts, his alma mater, before going on to a three-year stint at Harlan.

After winning 85 games in four years at Cawood, including a regional runner-up finish in 1986 with all-stater Nick Sanford, Jones left for Jackson County and stayed four years. After one season at Todd Central, Jones returned to Harlan County in the fall of 1991 to begin an amazing eight-year run as the Harlan coach.

The Green Dragons won 205 games in eight years under Jones, winning 13th Region titles in 1993, 1995 and 1996 and Kentucky All "A" Classic state titles in 1994 and 1995. Jones coached several more all-staters at Harlan, including 1995 Mr. Basketball Charles Thomas, along with Michael Jones, Todd Cox and Casey Lester.

After a six-year stint at Clay County, which included his fourth regional championship in 2001, Jones retired from coaching for three years and returned to Harlan County as an administrator at Cawood High School.

Jones was named the first coach at Harlan County High School in the summer of 2008. After posting the first losing record of his career in 2009, Jones led the Bears through a gradual rise in the ranks of the 13th Region. The Bears won 19 games in 2010, then 20 in 2011 and 27 in 2012. Harlan County won its second district title in a 25-8 campaign in 2013 and advanced to the 13th Region Tournament finals before falling to Clay County.

Mike Jones Coaching Record

Year School Record

1984 Cawood 18-12

1985 Cawood 20-6

1986 Cawood 25-5

1987 Cawood 22-10

1988 Jackson County 22-11

1989 Jackson County 24-8

1990 Jackson County 17-16

1991 Todd Central 17-13

1992 Harlan 21-9

1993 Harlan 33-6

1994 Harlan 28-4

1995 Harlan 33-4

1996 Harlan 27-5

1997 Harlan 17-10

1998 Harlan 19-10

1999 Harlan 27-6

2000 Clay County 21-9

2001 Clay County 25-8

2002 Clay County 18-13

2003 Clay County 16-12

2004 Clay County 24-6

2005 Clay County 21-8

2009 Harlan County 13-15

2010 Harlan County 19-10

2011 Harlan County 20-10

2012 Harlan County 27-6

2013 Harlan County 25-8

2014 Harlan County 14-15

Totals: 613-255

Jones looks back on career as one of state's most successful coaches

By John Henson

Sports Editor

One of the most successful coaches in Harlan County history stepped down earlier this summer, perhaps ending a coaching career that began on the high school level in 1980 and has connections to most of the great players and teams in the county since that time.

Mike Jones posted a 613-255 record in 28 seasons as a boys basketball coach in a career that included stops at Cawood, Jackson County, Todd Central, Harlan, Clay County and Harlan County.

Jones' son Michael, a former all-state guard at Harlan and an assistant at HCHS the past six years, took over as head coach of the program this summer and led the Bears to a 19-12 mark as they try to bounce back from last year's 14-15 season, only the second losing season in Jones' career. Harlan County had lost five seniors from a regional runner-up team in 2013 but had only one senior last season and started two freshmen.

"I just thought it was a good time. I have given over 50 years of my life, either playing or coaching, to the game I love," Jones said. "I have always done my best and expected others around me to do the same."

Jones is excited about his son taking over the program and is confident he will do well.

"I have never valued anyone's opinion in coaching any more than his," Jones said.

"Michael is very knowledgeable about the game. He is well liked by the players and parents and relates well with the public. He will be fair, but firm. I think he deserves this opportunity. He has valuable experience as a player and coach, being involved in district, regional and state championship games."

Jones, a 1970 Clay County graduate, began his high school coaching career in the 1980-81 season as an assistant under Kirk Chiles at Cawood High School. The Trojans were regional runner-ups in both 1981 and 1983 before Chiles left for Somerset and Jones took over as head coach. In addition to being an assistant with the boys team, Jones was the girls head coach for two years, winning 49 games and two 52nd District titles, including a regional runner-up season in 1983.

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Jones was named the first coach at Harlan County High School in the summer of 2008. After posting the first losing record of his career in 2009, Jones led the Bears through a gradual rise through the ranks of the 13th Region. The Bears won 19 games in 2010, then 20 in 2011 and 27 in 2012. Harlan County won its second district title in a 25-8 campaign in 2013 and advanced to the 13th Region Tournament finals before falling to Clay County.

"Even though we were not able to accomplish as much as I would have liked (at HCHS), our teams played hard, conducted themselves well and, hopefully, learned more than just basketball. The hardest thing for me as a coach was to tell a kid he would not be able to make the team. I want all the players to know they were special."

Jones plans to watch the Black Bears from the bleachers next season, but he didn't completely rule out a return to coaching at some point.

"Who knows, if the right situation were to come available," he said.

He also feels he's leaving the program in good shape.

"I think they have a good mixture of seniors and younger players coming back with a really good freshman class," Jones said. "They just need to stay together and work to improve."

Watching a coaching legend for 30 years from the best seat in the house

If my records are correct, Mike Jones coached 868 boys varsity games in a career stretching back 30 years.

It's safe to say that I covered well over 500 of those games as a sports writer, about two thirds of his games in four years at Cawood and eight years at Harlan and about 90 percent of his games the past six years at Harlan County High School, along with a handful of games at Jackson County and a dozen or so at Clay County.

Last week is sometimes a blur, but my long-term memory is pretty good, if I do say so myself. It comes in handy in times like this when I try to put together a history about someone I've known a long time.

My first interview with Jones was in the fall of 1980, when I was still a senior at Cawood High School and Jones was in his first year as assistant boys basketball coach, a position he held for three years before beginning his career as a head boys varsity coach. We talked in the Little Theatre at JACHS about the upcoming season for the Cawood junior varsity team.

My most recent interview was last week in an almost empty Harlan County High School, where we talked about his decision to step down as the HCHS boys basketball coach, likely ending one of the most successful coaching careers in Kentucky history.

I like consistency, and no one was more consistent through the years than Mike Jones, both as a coach and person.

Very few people, however, were more misunderstood.

Jones had a way of intimidating people without even talking to them, a skill that likely came in handy when dealing with parents and fans through the years.

People would often say they felt for me when I was on my way to interview Jones after a tough loss. I sometimes would point out that I talked to him after Cawood's loss in the 1986 regional finals and after Harlan's loss in the 1994 regional tourney and in the 1999 finals. No loss now would ever be any tougher than those, I reasoned.

The truth was that it was never that tough to interview Jones. He was/is a tremendous competitor, but he always answered any questions I had professionally and honestly, both during the good and the bad times. We got to know each other so well that he sometimes communicated to his players through the comments he made to me for the newspaper. I knew what he was doing, but it always made for interesting reading, especially when he was unhappy, and as his players, especially in the early years knew, making Mike Jones happy was not easy.

Though his teams' playing style changed very little, Jones adjusted his approach in dealing with players through the years. I always thought it was funny when people complained that he was too tough. I used to say you should have seen him in 1994, and you wouldn't have wanted to see him in 1984 if you think he's a disciplinarian now. I had the good fortune of covering both Jones and Billy Hicks when I started writing sports for the Enterprise in 1985. I learned a lot of basketball from watching both of them in the early years and also figured out that one of the keys to their success was they simply worked harder than the rest of the competition, a trait I tried to copy in my own career.

It's going to be different not having coach Jones sitting on the bench next December when the season begins, but having his son, Michael, in charge will make the transition a lot easier, both for me and the Black Bears. Michael did a great job with the team this summer and deserves a head coaching opportunity as much as anyone I've worked with through the years. He learned basketball, and coaching, from one of the best. When I look back on all the great teams and players (my thoughts on the best of the Jones years are below), I feel fortunate to have had one of the best seats in the house for all those years.

The following is my look back at what I think is the best of the Jones era:

All-Jones teams

First team

PG — Michael Jones, Harlan, 1994
G — Charles Thomas, Harlan, 1995
G — Casey Lester, Harlan, 1996
F — Nick Sanford, Cawood, 1986
C — Todd Cox, Harlan, 1995

Second team

PG — Nathan Blanton, Harlan, 1996
G — Jeremy Asher, Clay County, 2001
G — William Fields, Harlan, 2000
F — Gary Greer, Harlan, 2000
C — Rodney Mitchell, Clay County, 2005

Third team

PG — Tyler Brewer, Harlan County, 2013
G — Brian Griffith, Clay County, 2004
G — Kyle Hogue, Harlan County, 2011

F — Greg Bibb, Todd Central, 1991
C — Richard Robinson, Harlan, 1999

Fourth team

PG — Angelo Smith, Clay County, 2002
G — Joel Kauffman, Harlan, 1997
G — Kyle Jones, Harlan, 1999
F — Garry Henson, Cawood, 1987
C — Richard Walker, Clay County, 2002

Best Jones teams

1. Harlan 1995 (33-4) — Led by Mr. Basketball Charles Thomas and fellow Kentucky All-Star Todd Cox, the Dragons made it all the way to the final day at the Sweet Sixteen, falling in the final four to Pleasure Ridge Park.

Harlan had to beat Knox Central in the semifinals and Corbin in the finals to make it back to the state tournament after being upset by Clay County the previous year in the semifinals at Manchester.

Nathan Blanton, who went on to play at Tennessee Wesleyan, took over for Michael Jones at point guard. Casey Lester was in his fourth year as a starting wing. Senior Kevin Hudson rounded out the backcourt in the star-studded lineup that helped Harlan gain statewide attention.

2. Harlan 1994 (28-4) — I've always thought this was the best of the powerhouse Harlan teams and probably the best team I've covered with a starting lineup that include two future Division I signees (Charles Thomas and Todd Cox) and three who went on to play on the NAIA level (Michael Jones, Casey Lester and Nathan Blanton), not to mention the steady Kevin Hudson at guard and Jeremy Simpson at forward.

That Harlan team blew out M.C. Napier in December, and the Navajos went on to win the 14th Region. The Dragons also won the first of two straight All "A" Classic state titles in Richmond but may have peaked too early, falling to Clay County on the Tigers' homecourt in the regional semifinals.

3. Harlan 1993 (33-6) — With basically the same team as 1994, the Dragons broke a 24-year drought between regional championships for Harlan County teams and they had to do it by beating perhaps the region's three other best teams as they knocked off Bell County, Clay County and Corbin in the regional tournament after losing to Cumberland in the 52nd District Tournament finals. The Dragons may have been the youngest team in the state tournament that year with Michael Jones the elder statesman as a junior. Charles Thomas had started to establish himself as a future star in his sophomore season, and the arrival of Todd Cox gave Harlan one of the state's best young big men

4. Harlan 1996 (27-5) — Jones has said none of his teams ever played together any better than his 1996 squad, led by seniors Casey Lester, Nathan Blanton and Jeremy Simpson, along with junior Joel Kauffman and freshman Kyle Jones. Harlan continued

to win despite losing Michael Jones, Charles Thomas and Todd Cox to graduation the past two seasons. The Dragons beat a tough Jackson County team in the regional semifinals before blasting Bell County in the finals. Harlan advanced to the second round of the state tournament before falling to Henderson County.

5. Cawood 1986 (25-5) — When you talk about 13th Region basketball, the mid 1980s could be considered the greatest era, for both players and coaches. In order to win the 52nd District Tournament that season, Jones' Trojans had to beat Ralph Roberts' Cumberland Redskins in the semifinals and Billy Hicks' Harlan Green Dragons in the finals. Hicks and Roberts are both among the winningest coaches in Kentucky history. Future Harlem Globetrotter Paul Gaffney was a standout player for the Redskins that season, but he was probably the third best player in Harlan County with all-stater Nick Sanford at Cawood and Jeff Miller among the state's top scorers at Harlan.

Cawood defeated Middlesboro and all-stater Lawrence Buell in the semifinals before falling in a heartbreaker to Clay County in the finals, losing a lead in the final minute when Woody Asher hit a go-ahead jumper in the lane. The Tigers also featured guard Richie Farmer, the 1988 Mr. Basketball, and Sean Pennington, who went on to play football at Eastern Kentucky University.

Sanford was the Trojans' star and led the Kentucky All-Stars to a sweep of Indiana in June, along with future Wildcat Rex Chapman. Senior Ronnie Ball and juniors Sam Metcalfe and Tommy Hensley were in the Cawood backcourt that season with junior Garry Henson playing center and Jeff Osborne serving as the region's top sixth man.

6. Clay County 2001 (25-8) — Not many expected the Tigers to win the title with Bell County and Cawood both fielding their strongest teams in years. Clay knocked off the Trojans on their homecourt in the semifinals, then beat out a powerhouse Bell team in the finals. Clay went on to defeat South Floyd in the state tournament's opening round, giving Jones a 4-0 record in the first round of the Sweet Sixteen, before falling in the quarterfinals. Jeremy Asher was the star for the Tigers, but freshman Brian Griffin had a big postseason performance with his 3-point shooting ability.

7. Harlan County 2013 (25-8) — After first-round regional tournament exits the previous four years, the pressure was on a senior-dominated HCHS team in 2013. The Bears, led by senior point guard Tyler Brewer, wings Alex Sergent and Chad Massingill and forwards Tyler Miller and Aaron Caldwell, plus key reserves James Bond and Zach Caldwell, overpowered Harlan and Middlesboro in the 52nd District Tournament. The Bears had to battle from behind against South Laurel and North Laurel in the regional tournament, winning both with gutsy comebacks, before falling to a red-hot Clay County team in the regional finals.

8. Harlan 1999 (27-6) — Jones' last game at Harlan ended with a loss to Clay County in Bobby Keith's final season as coach (Keith also retired just before the Tigers upset Harlan in the 1994 semifinals). The 1999 team featured Jones' son, Kyle, at guard, and Richard Robinson at center. Juniors Gary Greer and William Fields were also key players as Harlan bounced back to win the district title after falling to Cawood the previous year.

9 Cawood 1987 (22-10) — A senior-dominated squad, led by Tommy Hensley, Sam Metcalfe, J.D. Lambert, Jeff Osborne and Garry Henson, won 14 of its first 15 games in Jones' final season at Cawood. The Trojans were upset by Harlan in the 52nd District finals before knocking off Bell on the Bobcats' home court in the opening round of the regional. The Trojans appeared headed toward a rematch Clay County in the regional finals but were knocked off by Williamsburg on a last-second shot. Clay went on to win the state championship, two years after falling in the finals to Hopkinsville.

10. Harlan County 2012 (27-6) — After a strong finish the year before with a sophomore-dominated team that pushed Clay County to the final seconds in the regional tournament, the Black Bears were greeted with high expectations going into the school's fourth year. Led by Tyler Brewer, Chad Massingill and Alex Sergent out front and Aaron Caldwell and Chase Calton inside, the Bears set a school record for victories that still stands but slumped down the stretch. Middlesboro upset the Bears on their homecourt in the 52nd District finals, then fell to Clay County in the opening round of the regional.