

Frustrated Blue Jay coach, Joe Beck, resigns

By G.S. PETERS
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Junction City High School boys' basketball coach Joe Beck sat in his office after Tuesday's loss at home to Washburn Rural making the team 0-8 on the year. It was if the weight of the world had been lifted from the shoulders of the 40-year-old coach.

Monday he submitted his resignation as basketball coach to Dr. Max Heim, Unified School District No. 475 superintendent. That night at practice he told the team. And by Tuesday afternoon, the information was beginning to spread. After five years as head coach, Beck would step down at the end of this season. All that awaits now is the board's approval in February.

Tuesday night, he was trying to put things into perspective. Drawing from his hours of college literature classes, Beck borrowed from Shakespeare a line which summed up his feelings.

"The question is not that I have failed, but whether I am



Joe Beck

contented with failure?" he said. "There probably isn't anybody in town who hates to lose more than I do."

For all of his successes, the last two seasons have been very trying on Beck. After 17-5 and 11-8 seasons his first two years here, the Blue Jays have finished below the .500 mark during the next pair.

In 1981-82, they were 8-11 and last season dropped to 8-14.

Those records, combined with the slow start this year, put Beck under heavy scrutiny. But that pressure did not just begin this season.

"I have a letter that says the win-loss record has to be improved," Beck said, relating a message he got from Heim last spring. "What he means by improved and the way I interpret it may be different. I just assumed he meant a winning record."

Last year before the final regular game of the year against Salina Central, Beck met with Heim, JCHS Principal Larry Clark, and Stanley Abel, assistant superintendent for personnel. Again the message was the same — improve the record.

Beck's team lost that game but went on to win the substate. For the second time in his four-year stint as coach, the Blue Jays made the Class 6A state tournament. And, like his first season in 1979-80, the Blue and White were knocked out in the opening round by a team which would make it to the finals.

"I had a conversation with Joe last spring," Heim said on Tuesday. "I told him they weren't putting together the number of wins we had hoped for. I know that he had high hopes for this season."

Last year Beck may have saved his job by taking the Jays to the state meet. This year, however, the prospects seemed bleak for his retention as the head boys' coach.

For the 1961 JCHS graduate, the results now seem almost unquestionable. What he did admittedly was to speed up what inevitably would happen at the close of the season. He felt his time was short anyway.

For Beck, though, the resignation may be a blessing in disguise. He is a frustrated man looking for answers. When a team is losing, there seem to be only questions.

"I honestly feel I've worked harder this season than any other and got less results," he said. "I can't put my finger on the reason why."

In the past, Beck has been very popular with his athletes. Many of his compatriots could feel the pressures that were weighing on his shoulders. Perhaps one of the keys to his decision was the Blue Jays loss to arch rival Manhattan — a game in which JCHS frittered away a 13-point lead.

Most of the players on last year's tournament team have a special feeling for Beck. Many took a personal stake in helping him retain his job by winning in the substate.

"I've spent a lot of time with the program," Beck said. "Maybe I overtried. I spent a lot of time I didn't get paid for like in the summer and during the preseason. Maybe I'm too close to the kids. I care about what happens to them off of the court. Maybe I shouldn't care that much about them."

When Beck told his team Monday, there was mixed reaction. In fact, the Blue Jay boss could not really determine how the group felt.

Beck reassured them that he was going to see this year through. His decision was made to allow the school time enough to find a suitable replacement.

"I told them I was gonna be here working every day," he said. "I felt this would give the board time enough to select a replacement. I know when I got the job I didn't find out until July."

Beck took over the job from Jim Ratzlaff who is now the principal at Southwestern Heights. He received his bachelor of science degree from Kansas State in 1965, and a master's in administration in 1979. He coached at Liberty, Mo. and Bonner Springs before returning to his native Junction City for his first head basketball coaching job.

Beck would like to remain at JCHS as a government teacher. He is unsure now what the future holds for him in terms of coaching. One thing is certain, he will not be at court-side when the Jays play next winter.