

Tommy Keeler Sports Writing Portfolio W19

Love of sports, athletes keep Mountain View's Veney going for 30 years

By Tommy Keeler Jr.

The Northern Virginia Daily

QUICKSBURG -- Everybody loves V.

That's a phrase said numerous times about Mountain View assistant varsity girls basketball, football and softball coach Leonard Veney.

Typically, Veney is always the one behind the scenes, doing the little things and that's the way he prefers it.

But everyone at Mountain View knows just how important he is and has been for the past 30 years, helping to lead the Generals in three different sports.

"He's a throwback coach," Mountain View Athletic Director Keith Cabbage said. "He's a true disciple of what (the late and legendary Mountain View football) coach (Dick) Krol used to be like in the sense that he wants no credit, no recognition. He does all the behind-the-scenes work. He does so much laundry for the kids. The things that people don't see on the outside of coaching, Leonard does and doesn't want anybody to know about it."

Veney is the head junior varsity softball coach and was the JV girls basketball coach for many years and is an assistant JV football coach as well as assisting with all of those varsity programs.

He said he prefers to be an assistant over being a head coach.

"I like being assistant better," Veney said. "There's a lot to deal with as a head coach and some of it I would just as soon not deal with."

Veney is a 1971 graduate of Mountain View and he said he played football and basketball and ran track.

In 1992, then boys basketball coach Ron Smoot asked him if he wanted to help coach the boys basketball team and Veney said yes. Some 30 years later he's still going strong. He said he didn't think he would still be doing it all these years later.

He said he's been around sports his whole life and it's just the love of the game and the kids that keeps him going.

"Sports have been a part of my life ever since I could walk," Veney said. "It's hard to give up. I've either played, coached or been a part of a team since I was in the 5th grade. It's hard to not do it."

In 1996, Jeff Burner took over the girls basketball program and asked Veney to join him as an assistant coach. The two have been together ever since.

Burner said he's been invaluable to him over the years. Both Veney and Burner said they have a sort of good cop-bad cop thing going on that works well with the kids.

Burner said former assistant basketball coach and current Page County Athletic Director Bill Simmons said he only needed a few weeks in the program to realize how much Veney meant to it.

"When Bill first started helping me all those years ago, he said, 'I didn't get it,'" Burner said. "I didn't understand what Veney's role was' and what does he really do for (Burner). And he said, 'but within two weeks, I understood that he's the key to the whole thing.' He's just like that personality that is always behind the scenes talking to kids. If I'm mad at them he's the one talking them up. If I'm not mad at them then he's giving them grief. He's just one of those people that he can say something to you that cuts you right to the heart, but you're not offended by it. Some people have a gift to do that and he's one of those people."

Veney is known for his laid-back demeanor, which Burner said fits well with his personality.

Mountain View head JV girls basketball coach Kim Estep said Veney is great for the JV program.

"He's been a great support to me and helping me learn the ropes," Estep said. "And we're like good cop/bad cop sometimes with the girls. So, if I have to go in at halftime or after a game and then I have to be a little more forceful with what I have to say. And he comes right back in with all the positive things that they need to do and things like that."

Burner said Veney means a lot to him on the court and off it.

"He's like my family now," Burner said. "He's someone that I really respect a lot. I always tell everyone next to (Burner's wife) Amy, he's probably the person I talk to the most about life decisions. I talk to my parents, but I talk to V all the time because I'm with him all the time. We talk about everything."

In 1998 Burner took over the softball program as varsity head coach and asked Veney to join him as an assistant and of course Veney said yes. One year later Veney became the head JV softball coach and has been in that position ever since.

Out of all of Mountain View's athletic programs, perhaps none has struggled more than the softball program in the last 15 years. Veney said he's always liked playing baseball and he wants to see the program keep going and he loves being around the kids so that's kept him coming back.

Cubbage said Veney is the one that has kept the softball program going. The program has gone through many coaches over the last 15 years, but Veney is the one constant.

"He's the stability of the program," Cubbage said. "And I'll go as far as to say without Leonard, we may not have softball because of all the constant turnover on the head coaching position. He's kind of like the rock that holds that program in place. When things are tough, a

lot of coaches decide it's time to move on, 'I'm worn out, burned out' whatever. And then here's Leonard 20-some years into it."

While there has been constant turnover at the head varsity softball coach position, the players are very aware and appreciative of Veney sticking around and staying in the program.

"He's always pushing everybody to get better," Mountain View softball and girls basketball senior Alicia Bare said. "And that's something that we haven't really seen out of any (softball) coach other than him. It means a lot that he's stuck it through and worked with us all."

Mountain View junior softball and girls basketball player Reice Hedrick, who is Veney's great niece, said the fact that he's still coaching softball says a lot about him.

"I think it means that he really has faith in his players," Hedrick said. "He hasn't given up on us. I want to win at least two games for him before I go -- that's my goal."

One thing that is obvious is Veney's great relationship with the players he coaches.

Veney said a big part of it is because he's still a kid in some ways.

"I'm a kid at heart," Veney said. "I just didn't grow out of that. That's who I am."

Cubbage said the players look up to him and respect him.

"I don't know if anybody has a better rapport (with the players) than he does," Cubbage said. "His personal disposition -- low key. He'll joke around with the kids. Kids migrate to him. And I think the kids they want his attention, they crave his attention. And that's pretty neat."

Veney said he's always felt like it's important for the kids to have fun and he tries to make sure that they do.

"I can talk to them, I can relate to them pretty good," Veney said. "I think in sports you got to be serious and try to win it, but you got to have fun. If you're not having fun then it's a job and I don't want them to think that. I want them to have fun at it, because when I played, I played hard but I had fun."

The girls basketball players said they love having Veney around and being coached by him and it's not just because he'll sometimes give them candy or popsicles.

"To me he's always been lighthearted, and he always makes everything more fun," Mountain View junior Annika Dellinger said. "If I'm feeling down about a game or something he'll make a joke and it will lighten me up again and make me feel better."

"He's just such an inspiring person," Mountain View junior Bre Franklin said. "And he's not a loud person, but when he says something it's good things. He's just always been a leader. Just everything he does -- he's inspiring."

Estep said Veney's rapport with the players is very helpful in teaching them and getting the most out of them.

"He has a way of being drawn to the kids that need a little extra support," Estep said. "And he's usually pretty good at getting them to come around to our way of thinking and getting them to try harder. And he has nicknames for the girls and he picks at them, and they pick back at him. And it's just a constant back and forth. The girls love him, and I hope he knows that."

Veney said that while he likes to joke around with the players, he's also trying to teach them.

"I joke around, but I'm teaching a lesson while I'm doing it," he said. "Instead of hollering at them I try to get the point across but try to make light of it. I'm not above raising my voice, yelling at them, but sometimes they shut down when you yell at them a lot. You just try to be what they relate to and sometimes they listen and sometimes they don't."

Veney said his favorite part of coaching is getting the most out of the players and helping them improve.

"Seeing kids that aren't very good get better," Veney said of what he loves the most. "They want to get better, and they get better, and it makes you happy that you taught them something."

Veney began coaching football 16 years ago and has been doing three sports ever since. He said he does get tired by the end of the season, but he loves it too much to give it up.

He said football could be especially tough while he was trying to do a full-time job. He said he's now "sort of retired." He is now a job coach, a part-time position at Mountain View.

Veney said there were times in the past when he's worked almost 24 hours non-stop.

"During football season there was times when I'd go to work at 4:30 in the morning," he said. "And by the time we got done on Friday from the football game, got the film all ready to be looked at, it would be 2:30 in the morning. I'm up 22 hours. Then I go home and try to go to bed."

Mountain View Principal Mike Dorman said Veney is 'kind of iconic' at the school and in the community.

"He has definitely been a huge resource for us," Dorman said. "I could not tell you how many younger coaches he's mentored. He's super great with the kids, super resource there as well. He just knows how to deal with the kids, all walks of life. He gives them great advice. There's not much Leonard hasn't seen over maybe 25 years or so that he's been here."

Veney said it's been great that he's been able to coach at his alma mater all these years. He said he's coached children and now grandchildren of some of his classmates from when he was in school.

Veney said he loves coaching and mostly being around the kids, and he's enjoyed it.

"It's hard to retire, because when you retire you get old, and I don't want to get there," Veney said. "...I do this to stay busy. It keeps me occupied. I need structure in my life, or I'll just lay around and get fat -- fatter. It's been a fun experience for me."

Streтт helps lead Lees-McRae to skiing and snowboarding national championship

By Tommy Keeler Jr.
The Northern Virginia Daily

Sarah Streтт is part of Lees-McRae College history.

The 2021 Mountain View graduate was part of Lees-McRae's National Championship ski and snowboarding team at the United States Collegiate Ski and Snowboarding Association National Championships. The freshman also finished second overall nationally in the Alpine Combined Women's Snowboard Individual National Championships. The championships were held from March 8-12 in Lake Placid, New York. Overall, the Lees-McRae girls team won three team National Championships and one individual National Championship.

"First time in our program that we've ever won a national championship," Streтт said in a phone interview last week. "But it's the first time that our school has ever brought home a national champion in the past 12 years. So, it's pretty big."

The Skiing and Snowboarding team at Lees-McRae is not a varsity sport, but a club sport. Streтт said there was a combination of varsity and club teams in the event across all three divisions (Division I, Division II, Division III). She said going up against and beating Division I schools made it even sweeter. Lees-McRae is a Division II school, located in Banner Elk, North Carolina. The Lees-McRae men's team also won a National Championship.

"It's a pretty big deal for a small little club program, low-funded program to bring home four national championships and an additional individual championship," she said.

Streтт said the women's team finished third in the first event, the Snowboard Rail Jams on the first day. Then on March 9, Streтт competed in the Boarder Cross event.

She said she was third after the time trials, but she crashed in each of her next two races and finished eighth overall.

"That was a really fun event," Streтт said. "We don't really compete in anything to that degree in the regular season. This is my first year racing, so it was all new. Very big features and jumps and it was a really cool time."

On March 10, Streтт competed in the slalom snowboarding event and finished ninth and the team won its first team National Championship in that event. The following day the team competed in the slope-style event and she said they got fourth overall as a team.

On the final day, March 12, Streett competed in the giant slalom snowboarding event and she finished fourth overall. The men's and women's team both won the National Championship in that event.

Streett said all of the results are added up and go toward individual and team championships, which is how her team won the overall National Championship. Street finished second overall in the women's Alpine Combined Snowboard competition behind her teammate senior Lili Bauer.

"Second overall feels pretty good," Streett said. "It was not something I expected. I didn't really feel like I prepared enough for nationals. I was just there to snowboard. It was my first time racing, first year racing and first year competing at a collegiate national level. So it was pretty awesome to get second overall in Alpine."

Streett said the team had to really work together and come together to win the national title and that makes it more special.

"I think that's what makes the win really special is with the help of our coach (Aaron Maas) we've turned ourselves into these racers," Streett said. "And we're highlighting on our skills and abilities. And it really took all of us because when I was having a bad day, my teammates were having a good day. Although it's an individual sport, it really took a team and a community back home to support us and help us get to nationals."

Streett said it was also special to be in Lake Placid, home of two Winter Olympic Games, for the National Championships. The last time the Winter Olympics were held in Lake Placid was in 1980, the year the U.S. beat the Soviet Union in ice hockey in what is called the "Miracle on Ice." Streett said the award ceremony was held where that hockey game took place.

"Being able to compete in an Olympic town is really cool," she said. "The mountain is perfect, has all the right venues and housing for us all. It was really cool riding up the lift and seeing 'oh that's where the 1980 downhill Olympic start was for skiing.' Not a lot of people can say that you've raced on a mountain where Olympic champions were made. That kind of blows your mind."

Streett said she worked at Bryce Resort when she was in high school and through working there, took a job working for the United States Collegiate Ski and Snowboarding Association. It was through that job that she found out about the Lees-McRae Ski and Snowboarding team and decided to go there.

Streett said this was her first year racing on a snowboard and she enjoyed it. She also was able to race at her home course at Bryce Resort as the team went there four straight weekends for regular season competitions and the regional meet.

"It was kind of bittersweet coming home and competing on home turf," Streett said. "It was really nice being in front of a home crowd, getting to see my family and friends and getting support on those race weekends. The six-hour drive one way wasn't fun for four weekends straight. But knowing the terrain, knowing the race course -- Bryce Resort just has an

awesome facility for snowboarding and ski racing that not a lot of people know about. So being able to race on the home mountain is pretty awesome."

Streett gets to see a familiar face among her teammates at Lees-McRae. Corey Jackson, a 2021 Mountain View graduate, is a member of the men's team. Streett said Jackson wasn't at the national meet because he was at a mountain biking event.

"He's known me for the past four years," Streett said. "So having that support system and having someone that, he taught me most of everything I know about snowboard racing and racing in general. So I really have him to thank for all of it. Although I have coaches and I have a support system, he's really taken the time the last two years to prepare me for this and to work with me. He knows me. So it's nice having someone there who can help you before you even tell him a concern."

Streett said she also saw a familiar face at the National Championships; 2021 Mountain View graduate Eli Dellinger was there in a working capacity.

Streett, who played girls basketball and girls soccer during her freshman year of high school, has played numerous sports throughout her career. During her high school years she excelled nationally competing in youth rodeos and rifle shooting. She said doing those types of sports helped her with snowboarding.

"I believe snowboarding and especially racing and competing in freestyle events is 90 percent your mental game," Streett said. "When I was shooting competitively, we practiced mental toughness and mental game strategies all the time. So being able to incorporate those strategies that I used from my coach into snowboarding and being successful was really special to me. Because when you switch sports so drastically like that, you don't really think anything will carry over but it does."

She said she loves all of the sports that she's done and she also loves the fact that she's made friends from all over the country.

Streett said she's already excited for next season at Lees-McRae and trying to improve as a snowboarder.

"Being able to place third on time trials for boarder cross and being able to place top five in the country for two of my events, really opened my eyes to the possibility and the potential I have," Streett said. "So it gives me motivation going into the offseason on how to get stronger, how to get better. ...I'm ready to tackle next season already."

Strasburg names gym 'Millson French Court'

By Tommy Keeler Jr.

The Northern Virginia Daily

STRASBURG — Millson French wasn't looking to coach when he started teaching at Strasburg Middle School in 1971. He had just graduated from Bridgewater College and

hadn't thought about coaching until Tommy Simmons and Gary Rutz approached him about it that summer.

"Tommy must have told Gary that they were looking for a basketball coach, and somehow my name came up," French said in an interview Thursday night. "The next day (then Strasburg Athletic Director and longtime football coach) Glenn (Proctor) was interviewing me. The next thing I knew I was a football coach and basketball coach. I knew nothing about football. I was a football coach and a basketball coach and that's when it all started."

He started as the junior varsity basketball head coach and in 1974 became the head varsity basketball coach. He retired from coaching in 2013 and on Friday night Strasburg cemented his legacy by naming the gym "Millson French Court."

In between Friday's Central-Strasburg boys basketball game, they held a ceremony in French's honor.

French gave a speech thanking all of the coaches that he worked with. He also thanked Proctor and Strasburg Athletic Director Matt Hiserman as well as the School Board for making it happen, and he thanked his family.

"I'd also like to thank the Strasburg community," French said in his speech. "You welcomed me with open arms. You gave me your boys to mold, and they were a great inspiration to me. When I first got here, somebody said Strasburg would never win at basketball, and we proved them wrong."

After his speech he was given a plaque bearing the words, 'Millson French Court' and the initials 'SHS.' Part of the wood used for the plaque was taken from the old gym at Strasburg High School.

Hiserman said the words 'Millson French Court' will be put on the gym floor in June.

French finished with more than 450 wins, including district and region championships, and two state semifinal appearances.

Hiserman said in an interview Thursday the school wanted to give back to French for everything he's done at the school and felt naming the gym after him was the perfect way to do it.

"He put in all those years, not just as a basketball coach," Hiserman said. "But obviously as a P.E. teacher, and he helped coach cross country, football, track, softball at one point. There's probably nobody in that school that's put as many steps in the gym floor between the two gym floors as what coach French did."

Hiserman said he's been working with Gary Leake and Shenandoah County School Board member Andrew Keller on the naming of the floor for a few years, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to delay it. He said they wanted to make sure they could have a full crowd.

The Shenandoah County School Board unanimously approved a resolution to name the court “Millson French Court” on Thursday.

French said he could never have imagined that he would have the gym named after him. He said he didn’t coach for that reason — he just wanted to teach kids basketball.

“I would have coached for nothing, I love doing it,” French said. “I loved trying to help kids improve their skills and get better. And I’m still doing it now with grandkids and other people’s kids.”

French has a vested interest in Strasburg’s boys’ basketball program these days as his grandson, Grayson Hottle, is an eighth grader on the junior varsity squad. French said it’s been fun to watch his grandson play and it hasn’t been frustrating so far.

French said he fell in love with basketball watching the one or two Atlantic Coast Conference college basketball games that would be on TV when he was younger.

There’s no question he made an impact on many of the players he coached as well as other coaches.

Hiserman was an assistant coach on French’s staff and took over the job when French retired in 2013. He said French has had a huge impact on him.

“Outside of my dad, he’s probably the biggest influence on me coaching basketball,” Hiserman said with tears in his eyes. “I was under dad from playing and growing up, and when I started coaching, he became my other basketball dad.

“...He’s meant a lot to me in my career, not just as a basketball coach, but as the athletic director — he was with me as the assistant AD for a few years. Since the fall of ‘98 (when Hiserman arrived at Strasburg), there’s a lot of influence he’s giving me.”

Hiserman said his father was his coach growing up and in high school and he always used zone defense, so when Hiserman came to Strasburg, he learned how to coach man-to-man defense, which is what the program is known for.

When choosing a date for the naming of the gym, it worked out perfectly to have it on the same day as the Central game — French’s biggest rival over the years. French is also a Central graduate.

“I’m really happy about that, because that’s always been such a good rivalry,” French said. “I know (former Central legendary coach) Jerry (Walters) and I, we had a lot of great games. He won most of them. A lot of people used to think we hated each other — we were best friends. It’s just when the game started, you’re trying to win. That’s the gist of it. So, I’m really happy because we had a lot of great battles, and it’s kind of fitting for it to happen then. I’m happy for that.”

Two of French’s former players at Strasburg were coaching against each other in Friday’s Strasburg-Central contest. Central head boys basketball coach Jeff Whittle and Strasburg

assistant boys basketball coach JR Anderson were teammates on one of Strasburg's most successful teams in the 1997-98 season, a group that advanced to the state semifinals.

"Coach French has taught me a lot of things," Whittle said. "I've learned a lot from him when I was playing under him. And taking a lot of things from his coaching style into what I do now as a coach. ...He prepared me for college not only on the court but off of the court. A lot of life lessons from being on time and just working hard. He's a great example for myself and all my teammates. And I'm glad we were here to experience that because it is a well-deserved honor for coach French. He's a diehard Ram."

Hiserman said it was also appropriate to name the gym after French because of how well he took care of it.

"When he was a P.E. teacher, he swept that floor four times a day," Hiserman said. "So there's nobody that took better care, pride in that gym floor than what coach French has done. So, for that matter itself, on top of all the basketball stuff, is a great reason to put his name on it. Because it truly epitomizes him and what he stood for and what he did."

French said looking back on it, he really enjoyed his time as coach.

"I never regret one minute of it," French said. "And I'm sure sometimes I might have drove a principal or two crazy, but it was a lot of fun. A lot of fun. In fact, I don't know that I would've stayed in education as long as I did if it wouldn't have been for that. That was kind of the icing on top of the cake. I hope for the most part it was a lot of fun for the kids I coached."