A HALL-OF-FAME CAREER

NMJC board member Black has plenty of experience

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NEWS-SUN

As a newly elected board member of New Mexico Junior College, Ron Black has plenty to look forward to.

Of course, as the most prominent figure in the history of NMJC athletics, Black has plenty to look back on — and last month, he was given an opportunity to do just that.

Black, who was the head men's basketball coach at NMJC for 22 years, was honored last month for his induction into the Western Junior College Athletic Conference Hall of Fame. He was part of the inaugural hall-of-fame class of nine, a class which includes NFL hall-of-fame quarterback Roger Staubach (who attended New Mexico Military Institute) and Nolan Richardson, who won a junior college national championship as Western Texas' coach before leading the Arkansas Razorbacks to an NCAA title.

"I can't speak to the other people that were inducted, but I guarantee you there wasn't a more deserving person to be in the conference hall of fame than Ron," said NMJC women's basketball coach Ara Baten, who played under Black for two seasons. "For so many years, Ron was an institution in this conference."

There's a reason Black is considered such a WJCAC institution. He was a full-time teacher at NMJC from 1966 — the school's first year of existence — until his retirement in 1999. He also served as conference secretary and treasurer for 10 years.

But it's his prowess as a basketball coach that gained Black such notoriety. Involved with the program from its first year of existence, he ended up as the Thunderbirds' head coach for 22 years, amassing a 414-287 record and won two regional championships.

So when it came time for NMJC to nominate someone for the Hall of Fame's inaugural class, Black was an easy choice.

"I was absolutely thrilled," Black said of the honor. "It meant a lot to me. It's probably one of the greatest honors I've ever had."

And it's not too bad for someone who had no previous coaching experience, and who had not played organized basketball since being cut from his eighth-grade team.

Black grew up in Portales, graduating from Portales High School and Eastern New Mexico University. After spending a year teaching at Cameron State University in Cameron, Okla., Black saw an advertisement for a new junior college opening in Hobbs.

Black decided to visit the budding school — "It was just something to do," he said — and by the end of his one-day trip, had a new job.

In that first year, he merely helped drive the basketball team from location to location. Eventually, he became a volunteer assistant coach, then a paid assistant and, in 1978, the T-Birds' head coach.

"They offered me the job, and I took it, but not with any intention of doing it for 22 years," Black said. "I thought it was a thing I would do for a year or two, just get it out of my system."

Instead, it got into his bloodstream — and into the bloodstreams of T-Birds players and fans.

When Black was at NMJC, the T-Birds didn't just win games, they did so in a fast-paced, highly-entertaining fashion. The style of play often drew highly-regarded players to Hobbs and created long lines outside Caster Activity Center.

In one game against Frank Phillips in 1992, the T-Birds scored 152 points, still a school record.

"The two years that I played at New Mexico Junior College were my two most enjoyable years of basketball, period," said Baten, who was on that 1992 team. "I had more fun playing with coach Black than I had playing the game anywhere else."

Two T-Birds earned All-American status under Black — Greg Brown and Richard Hollis, who was the 1986-87 National Junior College Player of the Year. Black also coach Avery Johnson, who went on to a long-term NBA career and is now the top assistant coach with the Dallas Mavericks.

Ron Black has been honored with induction into the Western Junior College Athletic Conference Hall of Fame in February for all his years of coaching basketball at New Mexico Junior College.

FILE PHOTO

But one of the things Black is most proud of is that more than 80 of his players received scholarships to continue their educations at four-year schools.

None of those scholarships would have been available if those players had not graduated from NMJC — something Black helped all of them achieve, and something he takes great pride in.

"I wouldn't have wanted to do the coaching without the teaching, or the teaching without the coaching," Black said. "I've just been so fortunate to do what I love for as long as I did."

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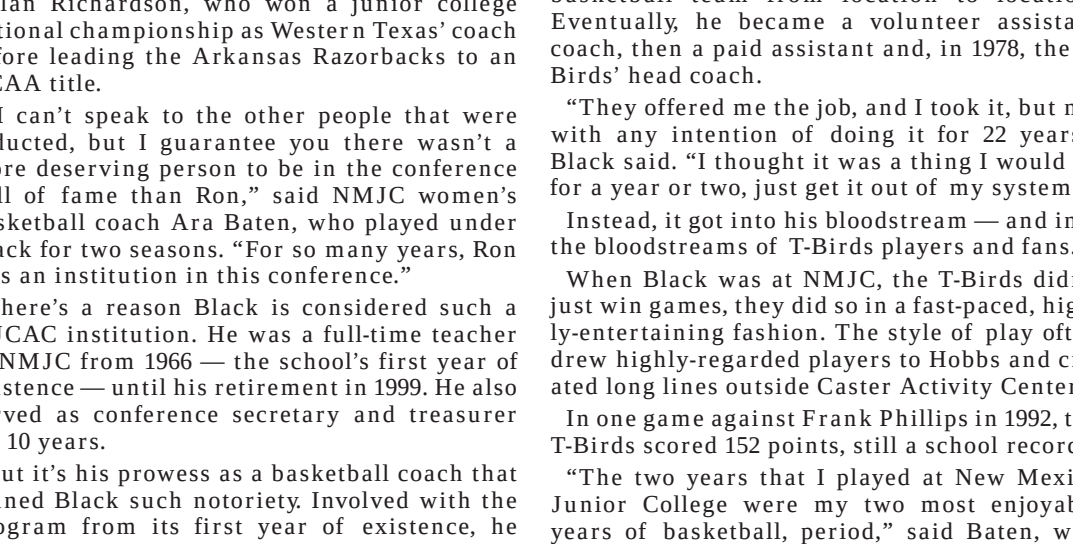

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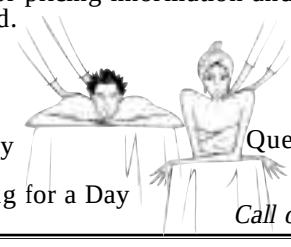

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