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Getting To Know ... Cabral Huff

By David Friedlander

david.friedlander@gwinnettdaily.com Sep 21, 2017 Updated Sep 23, 2017



Cabral Huff is the head boys basketball coach at Duluth. (Photo: David Friedlander)

Having grown up playing high school (Mays) and college (Morehouse) basketball in Atlanta, Cabral Huff has seen a lot of when it comes to the sport and the culture surrounding it in the metro area over the years. That knowledge and love of home is also what brought him back last year to leave a college assistant job to make over as head coach at Duluth High School. With his second season with the Wildcats looming, the 38-year-old recently chatted with staff writer David Friedlander about the uniqueness of Atlanta's basketball scene and the differences of coaching on the high school, college and professional levels, among other subjects.

DF: You've coached a lot of different places on a lot of different levels. I have to think the lure of coming back to metro Atlanta is what prompted you to leave a college gig at Alcorn State to come back and coach at Duluth.

CH: Coming home was definitely the deciding factor of coming back to high school basketball, along with the great administration and support we have here at Duluth. (Former) Coach (and now Central Gwinnett athletics director Eddie) Hood did a great job of selling me on what was here and what they had to offer. And Mr. (Anthony) Smith, our principal, and our (athletics director Tessa Heaton) did a great job, as well. It's been great.

DF: It didn't hurt that the cupboard was hardly bare in terms of talent, too, right?

CH: It was far from bare, and the guys really bought into what we were trying to do. They really have stepped their game up.

DF: That all said, you've coached for a while on both the college and high school levels, and you even had a chance into lower professional leagues. What do you feel you've learned from each level, and what are the differences coaching on each level?

CH: Basketball is basketball, but in high school, you're able to mold guys so much more than you are on the college level, and definitely on the professional level. In high school, you see that development. You see them grow from babies to men you're trying to send off to play at someone's college, hopefully. That's a major difference. When you get to college, you can get a kid better, but a kid's character and a kid's development has already been there.

DF: What's the toughest thing about coaching high school ball as opposed to college or pro?

CH: The toughest thing right now is that there are so many high schools. When I played high school ball in the 1990s, we didn't have nearly as many high schools as we have now. It sort of deteriorates the rivalries that you had like when I was playing back in the day. So that kind of makes it tough. And you have so many people outside the high school coach that are in the players' ears.

DF: I've heard a lot of different people talk about that last point being a major contributor to the increased amount of transfers to and from different schools in recent years. But going back to that first point you made about there being more schools, and therefore more choices for parents to send their kids to. Do you think that may also factor into the whole transfer question?

CH: I think it is. I do think parents always want the best place for their son or daughter in whatever sport to play. But I do think having so many choices creates this opportunity, so to speak, to say, 'OK, (the program) over here may give me a better shot than where I am currently.'

DF: And that line of thinking seems to be starting to carry over to the college game.

CH: College had, I think it was a little over 800-plus transfers just on the Division I level (last year). So it is trickling over. It's making college coaches (think about that). Obviously being in the college game (for several years), I talk to them a lot. It's making them think twice about kids who transfer schools so much in high school or transfer AAU teams so much. They really have to do their research into the background of kids that they're going to have some loyalty. And that's trickled down to high school, and it's caused us as coaches to really hone in on understanding what really matters. You can do everything you can for a player helping their families, but that doesn't mean that player is going to stick it out, whether it's financial reasons or what ever reasons. So you've got to understand why you're in this business, and it's really just to help kids.

DF: Let's go back to when you were in high school. You mentioned before that basketball is basketball. Has it changed at all since your high school days? If so, how much?



CH: The kids are definitely more athletic. I think they play one sport more year round than when I was in high school. I think that has changed. They get more training outside of what was going on in high school. So they're ... in a gym a lot more, but they're also in the gym a lot more playing games and not (necessarily) getting better working out.

DF: I hear that a lot from coaches of other sports who think that can lead to some burnout. The baseball coaches are particularly vocal about it, at least several that I've talked to over the years. What are your thoughts about players perhaps participating in other sports during the offseason, or at least spending more time to rest?

CH: It may not (necessarily) mean playing other sports, but I definitely agree with something Coach (Jesse) McMillan over at Norcross has said — his theory is that we play so many games. And I kind of agree with him. Now his theory is that you don't play summer games. Well, I think sometimes you need to play summer, no knock against (his school of thought). But for us, we don't play fall league. I just think if you go from November to March playing high school ball, then in April they're going to AAU, in June there coming to (high school) summer ball and in July back to AAU, what time to they have to get better if they play fall league? That's one of the main reasons I think we play too many games, instead of working on your weaknesses.

DF: Again going back to your playing days, what do you think you've drawn most from then and brought to how you coach now?

CH: My coach when I started was a strict disciplinarian. I pulled from him that you can be hard, but you can be fair. That was the biggest thing I pulled from ... Coach (John) Oatis at Mays High School, being hard, but being fair. I think once players understand you're going to hold them accountable, not just on the basketball court, but in the classroom, then they hold themselves to a higher standard.

DF: So now after a year back in metro Atlanta, what's been the most fun about your introduction to Gwinnett County basketball?

CH: It's tough and fun, twofold. I won a state championship at St. Francis (in 2013 and 2014), and we played a top-level schedule, but not everyone in our region was tough. No disrespect to them. But every night we step on the court in your region in Gwinnett County, it is a battle. So it's fun because you enjoy being in those type of battles, but it's also tough. North Gwinnett was the (last place) team in our region, and we went to overtime with them the last game of the season. I think we had four or five overtime games ... in our region alone. And our region sent five teams to the state tournament (thanks to the at-large bid in Class AAAAAAA). So that's the tough and fun part about it. I enjoy being back with kids who want to get better, not that the kids in college didn't. But to spark that development and see how they grow and get better, there's nothing better than that.

David Friedlander

Graduated from GSU in 1990. Have worked in sports journalism for the past 28 years, covering a variety of sports at the Gwinnett Daily News, AJC, Lafayette (La.) Daily Advertiser and Marietta Daily Journal before returning to Gwinnett at the Post in 2007.

