

CHC: Schmidt Recalls Vanderbilt Years

by Bill Traugher

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Former Vanderbilt head basketball coach Richard Schmidt came to the university after the controversial dismissal of Wayne Dobbs (1977-79). Dobbs had guided the Commodores in three seasons to records of 10-16, 10-17 and 18-9. The last season earned Dobbs SEC Coach-of-the-Year honors. Dobbs had replaced the legendary coach Roy Skinner.

Schmidt had been a graduate of Western Kentucky University and was a player on the freshman team as a walk-on. He later taught at Westport High School and for three years was an assistant coach to Bill Olsen who later became the Athletics Director at the University of Louisville.

Schmidt would become the head basketball coach at Louisville's Ballard High School where he built a dynasty.

"I started the program from scratch," Schmidt said recently from his Tampa office. "I took over when we had a seventh, eighth and ninth grade. Then we just added a year until the twelfth grade. That's what was good about it. You got to start the kids out when they were young and have them do what you wanted them to do.

"Teach them the way you wanted them to learn. We had a great program because our seventh grade team did the same things that the varsity did. That's why the program was successful. We would lose five starters from a team that would win 30 games and come back the next year and win 32 games."

In his eight years at Ballard, Schmidt would record an amazing record of 227-48 for an 82.6 winning percentage. Schmidt's 1977 crew won the Kentucky state championship. He was twice voted Kentucky's outstanding high school coach while sending 21 players to full college scholarships. Schmidt would leave Ballard for an assistant coaching position at Virginia under Terry Holland.

"Coach Holland was recruiting one of my players," said Schmidt. "We were just talking about coaching and he asked me if I was interesting coaching in college. I said yes. That's how it ended up in Virginia. I didn't expect that to happen, but it did.

"It was fun learning at the college level. Virginia had lost 15 to 20 games before my first year there and we ended up winning 20 games. It was quite a turnaround as we went to the



NIT both seasons I was there."

When Vanderbilt's Athletics Director Roy Kramer was reviewing applicants for the now vacant head coaching position, Schmidt would become a finalist.

"I don't have any idea how I got the job," Schmidt said. "I just applied for it. I felt like I could handle the job. I was successful as a coach in high school. I had been coaching two years in college and I thought it would be something I'd like to do. So I gave it a shot.

"The difference in the Atlantic Coast Conference I think is the travel is not as bad. The travel in the Southeastern Conference is what kills teams I believe. It is also easier to recruit in the ACC."

During Schmidt's first season at Vanderbilt, he finished with a record of 13-13. One of his starters Charles Davis was injured early in the season and would be red shirted. The Commodores under first-year coach Schmidt would lead the SEC in scoring averaging 79.3 points per game.

The highlight of the season was a 77-66 upset over fourth ranked LSU in Memorial Gymnasium. Other Vanderbilt players at this time were Mike Rhodes, Mark Elliott, Clarence Smith and Tommy Springer.

"I like to play good pressure defense with a lot of pressing and run a motion offense sometimes," said Schmidt. "That first year, we had guys that were not used to those set type plays. My philosophy in coaching is to adapt to the players you have, and use the talents they had.

"Beating LSU was a good victory for us. At the time we were playing very well. They came in there where it is hard to win in Nashville for a lot of people. We had some guys that later on in the season didn't play as well for several unknown reasons. But they played well that night. It should have carried over, but as it ended up it didn't."

The next season Schmidt's Commodores would conclude the regular season at 13-13 before entering the SEC Tournament. During the season, Schmidt made a controversial move to limit the playing time of seniors Davis and Rhodes. Rhodes was within reach of breaking Clyde Lee's all-time scoring record. The Vanderbilt fans and media were confused and upset.

"At the time, I felt we were heading into different directions," said Schmidt. "I was more interested in winning games than scoring points. I just felt that there were some freshmen there that year that needed to play. We played them and I think at one time we were



starting four freshmen and a sophomore in the SEC Tournament.

"We beat Mississippi State and then we beat Kentucky in the tournament who was supposed to be so good. I was just looking for the future. I was trying to get players to play to my philosophy, playing hard defense and that kind of stuff."

"It is always a strain when you make changes where you can't please all the people all the time. My idea was to develop a program more like Duke, also a private institution. Vanderbilt is not ever going to get that same kind of talent in there as some of those other SEC schools.

"You have to get guys that are dedicated to winning and playing hard defense just like Duke does. That's how (Duke Coach Mike) Krzyzewski was able to turn his thing around. He's got those kind of kids. That was my idea at the time. That was the direction I was headed in. It's always a strain when you are making changes at a school."

Vanderbilt would beat last-place Mississippi State, 71-58 in the opening round of the tournament in Birmingham. Rhodes only played eight minutes of the game and scored two points leaving him two points shy of equaling Lee's record. Davis, who was named to the Third Team All-SEC Team, scored nine points in 16 minutes as a reserve.

Vanderbilt's next opponent in the tournament was sixth ranked Kentucky. The Commodores upset Joe B. Hall's Wildcats, 60-55. Rhodes sat on the bench the entire game.

"Things just worked out for us," Schmidt said about beating Mississippi State and Kentucky. "I thought we finally turned a corner. We weren't starting some of the guys that had been playing four or five years. I'd gone with the freshmen that were going in the right direction. My feeling was in beating Kentucky was a situation that was very rewarding for the players and myself.

"We were trying to head this thing in the way I wanted it done. It was an amazing situation for us back then. We didn't have the shot clock and we were able to spread the floor out and we got ahead in the game. We did some things off our spread offense that gave us several layups. It was quite satisfying."

Ole Miss ousted Vanderbilt from the tournament 71-51 in the semi-finals. The Rebels had previous upset tenth-ranked Tennessee to earn its encounter with Vanderbilt. Playing as a reserve, Rhodes did break Lee's record with 10 points. He passed Lee's record with a foul shot late in the first half. Rhodes finished his career with 1,699 points.

At the end of the season, Kramer let Schmidt go as the university's coach. Schmidt stayed out of coaching for a year to decide on his future. In 1982, Schmidt went to the University of Tampa to resurrect a dormant basketball program. In his first season, Schmidt led Tampa to the Sunshine State Conference championship and the automatic bid to the NCAA Division II Tournament. It was the first time in NCAA history that a first year team in any division won a postseason conference tournament.

Schmidt is now in his 24th season as Tampa's head basketball coach. Under his guidance, Tampa has finished first or second in their conference in all but seven years. Schmidt was named as the SSC Coach-of-the-Year in 1986, 1989, 1990, 1993, 2000 and 2002. Entering the 2007-08 season, Schmidt had amassed a 500-210 record in Tampa.

"It's been rewarding," Schmidt said about coaching in Tampa. "I've been fortunate to recruit

some great kids. I started this program like I did at Ballard. I had a lot of kids go on to play professional basketball that weren't even recruited. That's what I've been able to do is improve the kids. I like to watch them improve and go on in life to accomplish things."

*If you have comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail
WLTraughber@aol.com.*