

SPORTS

Hall of Fame ending

Fridley's MacDonald steps down after 33-year run

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There were several conference titles and trips to state. There was a spot in the exclusive 400-win club as well, and ultimately an induction into the Minnesota Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

But in the end, the relationships made were what kept Jim MacDonald on the Fridley boys basketball sidelines for 33 years, the last 32 as the head coach. They are also what makes it so hard to step aside.

"First, it's the players I coached," MacDonald said. "I've been able to work with great kids and special families.

"Second is the people I work for, admin and faculty. I've always been given a lot of freedom at Fridley to coach the way I felt was going to improve the players both on and off the court, build winning teams and make a strong program from the youth level to the high school level. There was never a time from administration where winning games was more important than the integrity of the program and development of the players; the district has always been supportive and had the best interest of the players, coaches and program in mind. The trust they had in me and the trust I had in them was at the same level as it was with the players. We really worked together."

The start of MacDonald's Fridley journey was a story of the right choice made at the right time. Presented the option of continuing to student teach at West St. Paul or take a position in Fridley in 1987, he chose the latter. It didn't take long to realize he had found his home.

"I had just finished up my elementary portion of student teaching in West St. Paul, and I had the choice of staying in the same district or going to Fridley," MacDonald said. "I felt it would give me more exposure to different experiences in another district. Steve George was the head coach, and he was looking for an assistant. That year I learned so much from Steve, and to always remember you're a teacher first, then a coach. Steve informed me during the year that he was going to be stepping down at the end of the year."

MacDonald assumed the head role, where he remained for 32 years through this winter. As a teacher, he taught physical education and health classes at every building in the district, and he also was a head and assistant track and field



After 33 years — 32 as head coach — Jim MacDonald is stepping down from the Fridley boys basketball team. MacDonald's legendary career was filled with highlights, ultimately leading to a spot in the Minnesota Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame in 2019.

Photo courtesy of Fridley Public Schools

coach for 15 years. Remarkable longevity MacDonald was familiar with growing up, but that no one can fully predict for themselves.

"I did and I didn't," MacDonald said. "I grew up in a small town (Two Harbors) where teachers and coaches got jobs and pretty much stayed there their whole career. Once I was hired to teach and coach in Fridley, I had the mindset 'this is where it's going to be' because of the staff at Fridley. I worked with some legendary teachers, coaches and administrators who had tenures of 25 to 40 years. There were a couple of opportunities to look elsewhere, but Fridley was such a good fit for me. I initially worked as the district sub, teaching in every building. Fridley really made a commitment to me, and then I couldn't leave and didn't want to leave."

The stability in the program led to strength on and off the court, with a strong interconnection between sports and staff in the school.

"The relationships that were developed with the players, my assistant coaches and my early year mentors and faculty," MacDonald said. "To this day, I'm in contact with players and parents from the '80s up to 2020. A number

of my assistants have moved to other schools for head jobs or retired, and we still talk like they are on the bench right next to me. Early in my career, and continuing through to this final year, some of my best coaching advice came from legendary Fridley staff, including former wrestling coach Joe Frank, hockey coach Maurice Roberge, football coaches Jim Perry, Wayne Kratz and Larry Senrick, tennis coach Dave Loo and principal Don Meyer. They didn't know basketball, but they had great instincts for kids, relationships, motivation and all athletics.

"I should also mention Lori Rintala, an English teacher — many times she would help give me insight on the players. The workers at the scorer's table Bob Barnett, John Freitag and Pat Barrett, three legendary Fridley teachers and coaches, would drop some strategy game tips or positive comments during a game — that's a home court advantage."

The Tigers have enjoyed extensive success on the court, but the connections kept long after playing days were over are considered the greatest victories. The Fridley basketball family has grown under MacDonald's leadership for four decades, creating a long list of top mem-

ories to choose from.

"So many that it's really difficult to pick, and I don't want to leave any out," MacDonald said. "A personal highlight after a state tournament loss, the first phone call I got was from my high school coach who was able to stream the game in Texas (we should've gone zone). I take my role seriously due to the great coaches I had. It was a special time when I started as head coach, building a foundation, culture and direction for the program. It took a lot of time and work. I always felt each team was special regardless of the number of wins. I found it challenging to maintain a program once it was achieving success on the court, but those are challenges that really push me.

"Other highlights are that I've been fortunate to coach conference and section champs and state bound teams. I never compare teams, because so much has changed. In the '90s there were only two classes and we were battling all the big schools with the same enrollment we have now. The highlights are when former players come out and support current players, getting invited to weddings, getting notes on new jobs, new dads and calls for advice and suggestions. After a game, it was fun to meet up with former players and spouses, and hearing all the stories again and many stories for the first time."

Stepping aside after such a run is far from easy. But, while he won't be leading a team next winter, MacDonald isn't going too far from the basketball court, taking a job as an assistant at Mounds View.

"It was a tough decision, but a former coach who I coached against for years phrased it really well — 'You will know when it's somebody else's turn.' That's how simple it was. I knew. Going through all the boxes of photos, game tapes, letters and pictures made me ask, 'Is it time?' I could answer, what a great ride I had and Fridley gave me their best and I gave them my best. I retired.

"Then I received a call from a very good friend, Dave Bratland, who was St. Anthony's boys head coach and Mounds View boys assistant coach. He asked if I would be interested in the Mounds View girls assistant coaching position. I waited a good five minutes and said 'Yes.' So next year I will be wearing green and white. But I will always cheer for the black and gold."

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