

## Sports

## McDonald keeps the family business humming

by John Wagner

john.wagner@apgecm.com

A lot of boys basketball fans eagerly anticipated the game between Cambridge-Isanti and Forest Lake that the Bluejackets hosted on Saturday, Feb. 5.

Dayla McDonald was not one of those fans.

"I just hate this game," she said.

And the reason was as obvious as a look at the two team's benches. Coaching Cambridge-Isanti, as he had done for the past 35 seasons, was Mike McDonald. But the coach on the opposite bench should have been a familiar face to Bluejacket basketball fans, too: It was Mike and Dayla's son, Kyle, who played for his father roughly a decade ago.

It's not the first time Mike McDonald has faced off against family. In his younger days Mike coached against his father, Chisholm legend Bob McDonald. And Mike has coached against his brothers, Tom McDonald at Ely and Joel McDonald at Hibbing.

What's more, when it comes to the Class 4A Section 7 tournament, three of the eight teams in the section – Cambridge-Isanti, Forest Lake and Duluth East, which is coached by Mike and Dayla's older son, Rhett – are led by McDonalds.

"Someone has to lose, and I hate that," Dayla said. "All three of them laugh at me, but knowing that someone has to lose makes me feel terrible. I know how hard they all prepare for every game, how much they care for their team and their players."

## FROM FATHER TO SON

To say that Mike McDonald is obsessed by basketball would be an understatement.

"I find X's and O's all over the house," Dayla said. "He's always watching something, whether it's a game on TV or a tape of a prior game. And if he sees something, he's looking for a piece of paper to write it down. That's who Mike is."

"And the boys are just like him. When I watch Kyle, it's like watching a young Mike. Mike was so intense, he would basically undress on the sidelines. Some-



Three members of the McDonald family pose for a photo prior to a summer league contest. From left are Duluth East coach Rhett McDonald, Cambridge-Isanti coach Mike McDonald, and Forest Lake coach Kyle McDonald. Submitted photo

thing would go wrong, and the jacket would come off. He'd see something he didn't like, the tie would come off. Now, he's mellowed."

Mike said that obsession with basketball came from watching his father prowling the Chisholm sidelines for 53 of his 59 seasons as a coach. While his sons may not have had many chances to watch their grandfather coach, Mike hopes his sons see the best of Bob McDonald in him.

"Dad retired in 2014, so Rhett probably saw more of him coaching than Kyle did," Mike said. "We would play against Chisholm most years, so they knew him."

"There's a standard my dad set, and I know they are representing him when they coach. But every coach carries that burden, because they're representing more than just themselves: They represent their school and their community every time they coach."

Kyle said he learned that lesson from watching and listening to his grandfather and father.

"My grandpa was basically an extension of the lessons my dad taught me," Kyle said. "My grandfather was all about the community of Chisholm, and he was all about doing things for others. He would work with the little kids on Saturdays, and he was involved with the rec sports in the summer."

When Bob McDonald passed away late in 2020, Kyle said he was struck by the accolades that came cascading from

around the state in tribute to his grandfather.

"That was a week or two that was really hard on my family and me," Kyle said. "It was amazing to experience the number of lives that he touched during his career. We heard it on the news and on the internet, and it was amazing to hear about the number of lives he touched."

Now, when the family gets together, the focus is not on basketball. Well, not exclusively on basketball.

"When we're together, we don't talk much about X's and O's," Mike said. "We just enjoy one another's company. We may talk basketball, but it's something like who they are playing next, or something that's going on in the world of basketball as a whole."

Mike said one of the reasons his family has not become entangled in negative passions caused by basketball is the influence of his wife.

"Dayla has been a great partner in the coaching business," Mike said. "A successful coach has to have a successful, supportive wife. She's my sounding board, and sometimes she's my biggest critic."

## THE NEXT GENERATION

Dayla laughed when asked if she knew her sons and daughter would grow up to become coaches.

"Does a McDonald have a choice?" she asked.

But it was not hard to get the McDonald children to enter the basketball world.

"When they were kids, we had a little locker room with their uniforms and everything," Dayla said. "They were players first. If one of them wasn't dribbling a ball in the house, they were either sick or sleeping."

Kyle said he learned a number of lessons from his father about being a basketball coach – and many of them had nothing to do with X's and O's.

"I've watched my dad coach hundreds of games through the years, and the thing I've learned is his personal relationships with people," Kyle said. "He taught me a career is not judged by wins and losses; it's judged by the relationships you've developed on and off the basketball court."



Earlier this year, Cambridge-Isanti coach Mike McDonald earned his 500th victory as a head coach. Photo by John Wagner

"My dad treats every kid the same way, and he always has. He takes a lot of time creating relationships from kids and their families. I think it's the most important part of coaching."

Well, Kyle remembered his father having one player he treated a little tougher than the others.

"I remember my dad telling me he was going to be hardest on me, and I remember him telling my brother the same thing," Kyle said. "Actually I got used to him being hard on me."

"I remember my brother Rhett coached me on an AAU team, and he got after me more than he did any other player, too."

Kyle admitted that he had learned some coaching lessons from his older brother.

"I remember watching him play when I was a ball boy and he played for the Bluejackets," Kyle said. "Rhett absolutely loves the game of basketball. He's obsessed with it; he puts a lot of time into it. And his emotion comes from wanting to succeed on the basketball floor."

"His guys work hard for him, and that's something I hope I have learned from him."

While Kyle admitted there might have been some pressure following his grandfather, his father and uncles, and his brother into the profession, it was a pressure he was willing to accept.

"There's some pressure, I guess, having the McDonald name," Kyle said. "But I was never pressured to coach basketball. I saw my grandpa and my father and my brother coach, and it's something that I've always wanted to do myself."

"It's a way of life McDonalds have: To coach and teach kids through basketball, and to build relationships through basketball. It has been a dream for me."

## HEAD TO HEAD

Kyle McDonald returned to Cambridge-Isanti High School, where he had starred for the Bluejackets before attending Wisconsin-Eau Claire, as a head coach for the first time on Feb. 5.

And right away, he was a little disoriented.



Among those watching the contest between Forest Lake and Cambridge-Isanti were Kailee McDonald, left, and Dayla McDonald. Dayla is Mike McDonald's wife and the mother of Kailee, Kyle and Rhett. Photo by John Wagner

# Sports

## MCDONALD

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“I don’t know if I had ever looked at the gym from that sideline before,” Kyle said. “Everything was backwards for me. I had never coached against my dad before, so that was weird. And I’ve never had my mom cheer against me before.”

When Mike saw his youngest son on the visitor’s bench, he said he was overcome by a variety of emotions.

“The first thing that came to my mind was how proud I was to have him follow me in the business of coaching,” Mike said. “Basketball has been a big part of our lives. So I feel so much pride, watching my son establish his vision for the Forest Lake program.”

Mike admitted that it was a little easier coaching against Kyle because he had faced his older son Rhett whenever the Bluejackets tangle with Duluth East.

“Coaching against your kids is not easy,” Mike said. “It’s bittersweet. For example, it was great when we beat Forest Lake. But it wasn’t great to walk over shake the hand of my son, who wants to win – and could have won.”



Mike McDonald, foreground, and Kyle McDonald, background, shared the sidelines when Cambridge-Isanti hosted Forest Lake in a boys basketball contest on Feb. 5.

Photo by John Wagner

“I want them to be successful. But I don’t want them to be successful against me.”

Just three days later, Kyle and Rhett locked horns as head coaches for the first time when Duluth East played at Forest Lake. Kyle said he dealt with mixed emotions in that contest as well.

“We were at home, but it was still my brother,” Kyle said. “Rhett and I coach alike – I’d say we are very, very vocal. I’ve taken a lot from Rhett, and I’ve always looked up to him. As my big brother, he’s always been my role model.”

The threesome split the head-to-head meetings this season. Duluth East swept two contests with Cam-

bridge-Isanti, beating the Bluejackets 94-52 on Dec. 14 before claiming a 63-45 victory as part of the Twin Cities Orthopedics Holiday Class on Dec. 29.

C-I defeated Forest Lake 56-49 on Feb. 5, but the Rangers knocked off Duluth East 55-52 on Feb. 8.

The three teams did not meet in the Class 4A Section 7 tournament. Cambridge-Isanti suffered a 79-64 first-round loss to Andover, the top seed in the section, on March 10, while fourth-seeded Duluth East knocked off Blaine 60-58 that night before dropping a 73-52 decision to the Huskies on March 15.

Meanwhile Forest Lake, the sixth seed, upset Centennial 56-50 on March 10 before dropping a narrow 54-52 decision to Coon Rapids in the semifinals.

Dayla was happy she did not have to pick a favorite – but unhappy a McDonald was not able to prevail.

“Does anyone else have the privilege of having their husband and their two sons in the same section?” Dayla said as tears came to her eyes. “How lucky am I? It just doesn’t happen.”

The only people luckier are Minnesota basketball players, teams and fans who have enjoyed having the McDonald clan coach basketball teams around the state.

## McDonald coaching tree

**Bob McDonald** spent 59 years as the boys basketball coach at Chisholm High School. His 1,012 wins are the most for a coach in Minnesota basketball history, and he was inducted into the National High School Hall of Fame in 2014.

Bob had six children: sons Mike, Paul, Tom and Joel, as well as daughters Sue and Judy.

- **Paul McDonald** retired after posting 538 wins at Vermilion Community College.

- **Tom McDonald** has won 560 games at Ely High School.

- **Mike McDonald** has won 505 games at Cambridge-Isanti High School.

- **Joel McDonald** has won 287 games at Hibbing High School.

- **Sue Tesdahl** won 147 games as the girls coach at Crosby-Ironton High School.

- **Judy Racek** won 29 games as the coach at Nashwauk-Keewatin and Fairmont high schools.

Among Bob’s many grandchildren are Mike’s three children: sons Rhett and Kyle and daughter Kailee.

- **Kailee McDonald** is an assistant girls basketball coach at Duluth East High School.

- **Rhett McDonald** is the boys coach at Duluth East High School.

- **Kyle McDonald** just completed his first season as boys coach at Forest Lake High School.

Other grandchildren include **Bryce Tesdahl** (Sue’s son), the boys coach at Minnetonka High School, and **Tomi McDonald**, Paul’s daughter, who was the women’s head coach at Vermillion Community College.

## North Branch boys hoops loses in section semis

by John Wagner

john.wagner@apgecm.com

The North Branch boys basketball team saw its season come to an end in a 59-53 loss to Hermantown in a Class 3A Section 7 semifinal contest played on Tuesday, March 15 on the Vikings’ home court.

North Branch, the number two seed in the section, got points from eight different players. Senior Trevor Johnson led the way with 12 points, but no one else finished in double figures; junior Carson Klein was the closest to do so, finishing with nine points.

“Congratulations to Hermantown –

it was their night,” North Branch coach Todd Dufault said. “The guys battled hard, but we had too many turnovers.

“Hermantown hit free throws and made the plays to secure the win. We got beat by a really good team.”

North Branch finished with a 16-11 overall record, easily the team’s best mark in roughly 20 years. And while the Vikings lose eight seniors off the varsity roster, Dufault is bullish on the program’s future.

“Our JV team was 18-6. Our freshman team was 18-8,” he said. “We have a lot of work ahead of us, but we will be back for more next year. One journey just ended. The next journey is about to begin.”



North Branch senior Adam Rehm looks for an opening in the Vikings section semifinal contest against Hermantown. Rehm finished with eight points in the Vikings’ 59-53 loss. Photo by Jorge Perales



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