

Every Player's A Winner

County League Helps Youths Gain Life Skills, Confidence

BY TERRY POPE

For the kids it's a learning experience. For the volunteer coaches it's a chance to teach about life, goals and teamwork. What unites the two is a popular sport, basketball, but behind every great shot, magical pass or dominating rebound are children with their eyes focused on the future.

"I envision a kid coming out of a game and a coach puts an arm around him and says, 'You're doing great, but what you need to work on is this,'" says Joe Rosselli, of the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department. "Not the screaming and negative comments that can really destroy a kid's confidence in life."

The Parks and Recreation Department's youth basketball program aims to be more than just a sports camp for athletes. It brings the children and coaches together to help steer the young boys and girls toward success in life through a fun and meaningful experience. The positive aspects of the sport are stressed with the hope that every participant can realize his or her goals in life.

Not every child who picks up a basketball will one day become a Michael Jordan. Dreams can easily be made or broken at such a tender age.

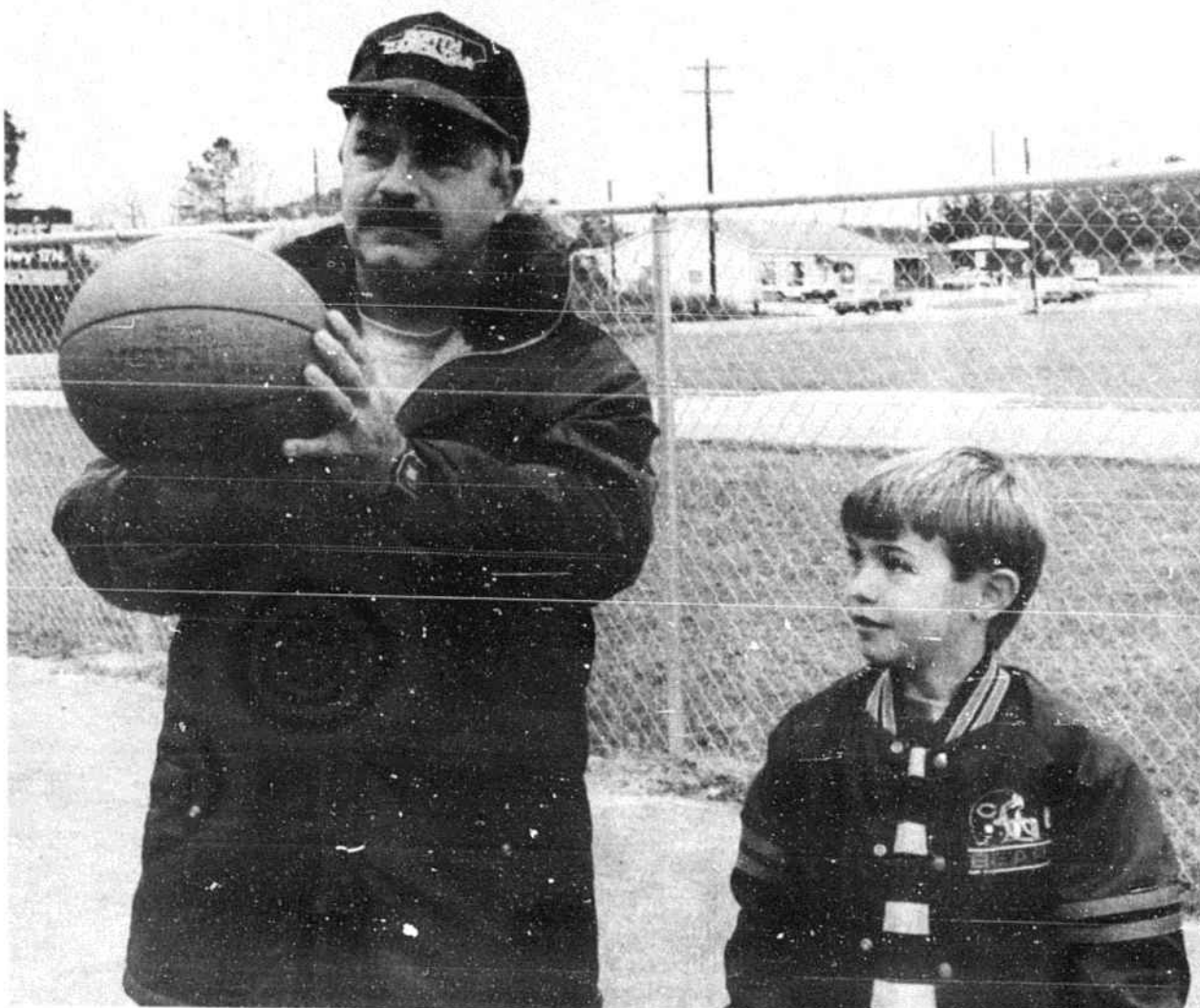
There is an ugly side of sports, too, the side that stresses the gold championship rings, trophies, television contracts and the side that places athletics ahead of academics. The corruption of the youth has become a national sports pastime where old-fashioned values have been turned upside down. Fighting that trend of slipping values is this program's major concern.

"I just don't think we need eight-year-old kids participating for trophies," said Rosselli. "We really stress the fact that our program is a learning experience. We run on Saturdays only so it will not put a burden on their school work."

From mid-December to mid-February, about 60 boys and girls gather at the Shallotte Middle School gym on Saturdays for practice. There are about eight girls registered. Players are divided into three age groups: children eight and under; ages 9-10; and ages 11-13.

Students who participate in the middle schools' competitive basketball program cannot participate in the youth league. That doesn't just stem from a concern about the level of competition. Organizers want to create more opportunities for youths who are less talented but who can benefit both socially and physically from the program.

Phil Wemyss, a science teacher at Shallotte Middle School, is one of the volunteer coaches. He has watched some participants graduate to the middle school program. Not only have their skills increased, but improvements in attitude and teamwork also evident, he said.



VOLUNTEER COACH PHIL WEMYSS practices techniques of shooting a basketball with his son, James, a youth league member.

"We try to teach proper offense and proper defense," Wemyss said, "but we also teach them to think. Most of the guys that play middle school ball have played in this program."

Another youth basketball league has formed in Brunswick County, one that chooses teams and keeps a record of wins and losses and statistics on scoring leaders. It is often confused with the parks department's youth league, but the two programs are miles apart.

The league not sponsored by the parks department charges each child \$20 to register while the county's

youth league charges \$10 per child. The county program awards each child with a T-shirt. Wins, losses and scores are not kept in the parks department's program. The volunteer coaches feel children do not need to be introduced to competitive sports so quickly in life.

"Our program is not there for the competition," Rosselli said. "It's there for a teaching of skills. The emphasis is put on coaching the skills and letting the

child have fun. If the child is having fun, he'll learn. If you put a child into a pressure situation of having to make an important basket so his team can win a ballgame then it's not going to be fun anymore."

All volunteer coaches in the county youth league must become certified. Coaches, like Wemyss, must take a six-hour course that covers the fundamental phases of coaching, first aid, liability, good nutritional habits and techniques of the sport. The parks department collects information about the coaches to build a resource pool of volunteers.

"A lot of times we don't know anything about our volunteer coaches," Rosselli said. "Volunteer coaches are the backbone of our program."

Programs operate at Shallotte Middle, Leland Middle and South Brunswick Middle schools. The county hopes to expand to Waccamaw Elementary next year.

"We stand behind the programs we have now," Rosselli said. "We have altered our program to make it more enjoyable. We really encourage the parents to come and sit through the practices and game situations. We're always looking for new ideas."

Children eight and under are taught the basics of the sport, said Wemyss. Portable baskets with goals that can be lowered are used for the younger players. At that age, children are prone to use one hand more than the other while the sport requires that players use both.

"We try to catch that when they are young," Wemyss said. "It's a problem for them when they can only use one hand."

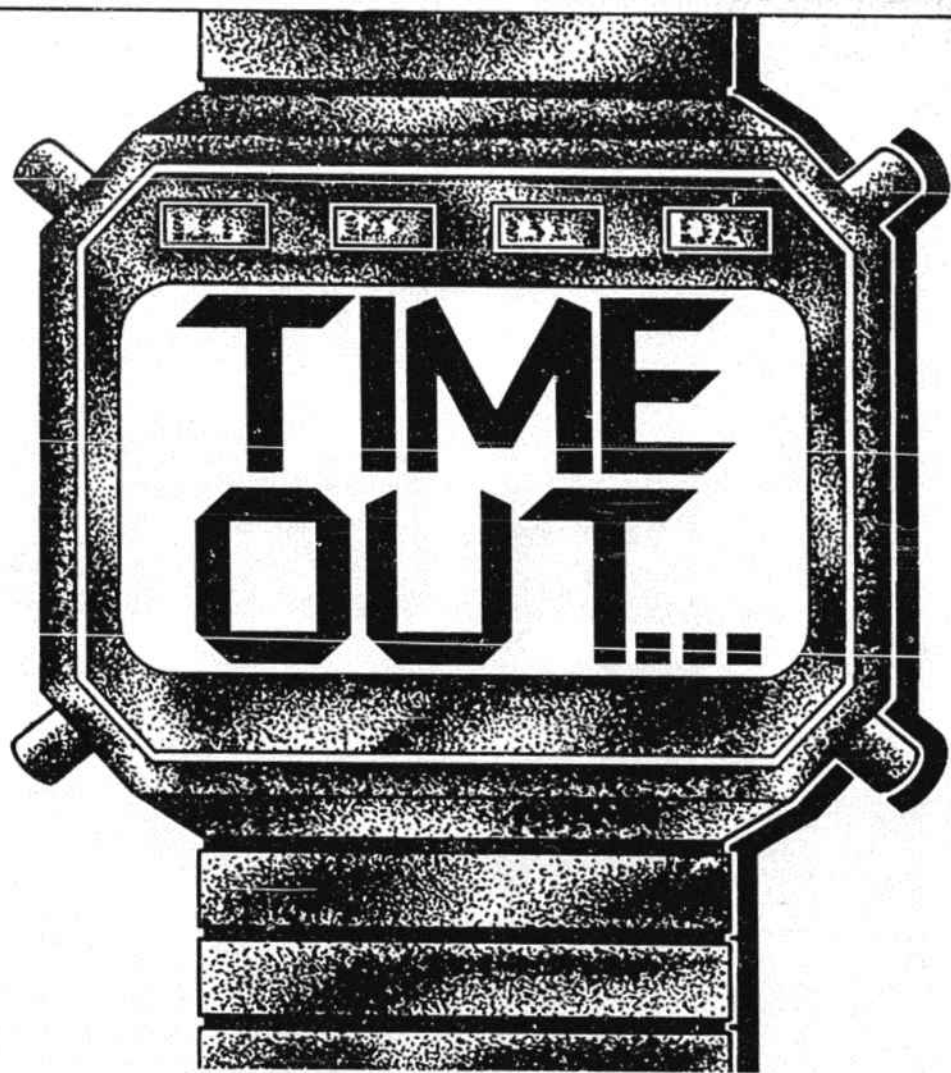
Those on the upper level, ages 9-13, cover the basics and practice dribbling the ball around obstacles and setting up defenses as a team. Coaches put the players through both practice and game situations.

"We're working more on a team concept with this age group," Wemyss said. "It's a practice and a learning experience where the coaches will stop and explain things."

Players ages 11-13 will get a taste of competition in mid-February when a county tournament is held at South Brunswick Middle School. The winning team gets to compete in the Statewide Athletic Competition, or SWAC. It's a chance for players from the separate county programs to meet one another.

Rosselli says the emphasis is on sportsmanship instead of winning.

"We try to teach them that you do learn from losing," he said. "We want it to be a really pleasant atmosphere to the young kids. We really feel to emphasize the teaching of skills and techniques makes it a better quality program. It takes away the pressure to win."



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