

Legacy of a leader

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Obviously, Columbine High School, hoping to reopen its doors by Aug. 16 for the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year, intends to have its administration fill the positions previously occupied by the late, great Dave Sanders. It will not, however, fill the void. It's just too darn big.

"Dave Sanders will never be replaced," said Kevin Land, Columbine's assistant principal/athletic director. "Some will take over his responsibilities, but nobody is replacing Dave."

Indeed, replacing a hero is all that it's cracked up to be - virtually impossible. You can get close, yes. There are similarities. Tendencies. Familiar nuances that light memory lamps. Maybe even a few surprises.

Still ... no, it's not the same. Now or in the future.

Never.

But trying to follow in the footsteps of one, even attempting to mirror a man's work, courage, effort or caring for others, can be well within reach.

Hence, The Dave Sanders Colorado Coach Award, instituted by The Denver Post Sports Staff in accordance with Sanders' wife, Linda Lou Sanders, annually will honor an outstanding schoolboy or schoolgirl coach. Dave Sanders is the inaugural winner, posthumously.

"I think it will be a great honor for a great man, great coach, great father and great friend to his players," Linda Lou Sanders said of hoping to keep her husband's name associated with Colorado teenagers and their games.

They were so much of his life for so long.

Why should his death change any of that?

By now, the story has been etched in so many minds. The 47-year-old Sanders died with 12 students at the hands of two other teenagers at Columbine in the worst shooting spree in the history of the American school system.

A teacher/coach for 25 years, Sanders has since been credited both by students who were in the school during the shootings and bombings, and by authorities who investigated the aftermath, with being a man who willingly paid the ultimate price - he gave his life to save others, perhaps hundreds of teenagers.

It's a fact - Sanders forgot about himself during danger. Getting others to safety, either outside the building or hiding in the school during the melee, saved more lives than we want to think about during a terror-filled segment that stretched into hours.

He died from gunshot wounds he suffered in the school.

Longtime friend and Rebels coaching pal Rick Bath, who said, "I spent more time with Dave than my wife," admitted that he once "tried to get him to be tougher, but then he would turn around and try to get me to be much softer." Tougher?

Said Bath, "He was a stand-up guy."

Born in Indiana, Sanders went on to be a schoolboy competitor in basketball, baseball and cross country, opted for a junior college, then finished at Chadron (Neb.) State in the mid-1970s. He interviewed for a position at what was the new Columbine school in Colorado in 1974, and the life of a teacher/coach began.

After countless conversations with Sanders on the subject, Bath soon was convinced "that's all he ever wanted to do."

So that's what he did. Sanders was a popular business teacher because he was intelligent, but not a know-it-all, and one who had the knack of getting virtually all of his students to take themselves and their work seriously.

Ask any teacher past or present - if you can accomplish the above, you have the best chance at reaching kids.

Sanders understood it and excelled.

Land, who saw that Sanders knew when to raise the bar in challenging both his students and players, scoffs when thinking "people have the misconception that most coaches, including Dave, were in the physical-education department. That's not true. That's one small department in a high school. They always classify them in that order.

"But they're more important than that," Land said. "Dave was the consummate teacher/coach. That's what I call them - teacher/coaches ... teachers first, because they are."

Land feels much of Sanders' overall success at the school was because of his "ideals and mannerisms. They were great, on an even keel with colleagues and students. A lot of kids respected him."

As for the coaching circuit, Sanders, who long ago made a commitment to girls' athletics, didn't care about the title of his position. He just wanted to be involved. Notable on his odyssey was helping lay the groundwork for some of the girls' newer programs growing statewide in soccer, basketball and softball.

He dabbled in cross country, too, although one of his proudest moments came last winter, when Columbine's girls' basketball team snapped a 12-year streak of losing seasons with a 12-8 mark, an appearance in Round 2 of the big-school playoffs and a 6-3 mark in a competitive Jefferson County.

It was further encouraging news for a school that hasn't won a Colorado championship in a girls' sport, but the victories and defeats weren't really Sanders' primary concern.

"He was thoughtful in his process of dealing with kids," Land said. "He kept the kids No. 1. His won-lost record or personal satisfaction was secondary in treating the kids just right."

This was a guy who didn't worry about transfers when they became an issue earlier this decade. "He said," Bath remembered, "'If they come, they come.' " Never yelled at his players. Refused to acknowledge complacency. Was just as happy to be an assistant as a head coach. He did his best to get his players scholarships so they could compete in college.

That was it, competition, and how his players handled it, what they learned from it.

Those were the things with Sanders.

"He was great with all of the kids, and they were great with him," Bath said.

"There were times when we were getting our butts kicked all the time, but they came to practice every day, and everybody was happy."

Dale McCoy, a former boys' basketball coach with Sanders at Columbine and now the athletic director at Northglenn, insists Sanders "would do anything you asked to benefit the program and the kids. And he was very accessible."

That was evident, Land said, "because he was a true coach and in so many things ... soccer, football, baseball, softball, basketball. He once was the coed track coach, handling both. For several seasons, he was coaching three sports, and in this day and age, that's remarkable. He coached in the summer, too."

Then, when the details of the tragedy surfaced and Sanders was identified as one of the dead, Colorado's teaching and coaching fraternities were dismayed that they had lost one of their own, but certainly not surprised that Sanders was in the middle of it, trying to save as many as possible.

"When I first heard about it," McCoy said, "I had so much heartache for all of the people down there. I thought, 'Oh, geez. Dave ... of all the people.' There he was doing all of his stuff. He's always done it. He didn't think about it. He just didn't hesitate. He always put others in front of himself."

Land, who was in Northglenn attending a Colorado Athletic Directors Association conference when the tragedy occurred, seems deeply moved by Sanders' final actions.

"When it started," Land said, "where his location was, he very easily could have made a self-saving escape. (But) he chose to help others.

"None of us knows how we would react in something like that. Do we get people out or take care of ourself? Until you are, you don't know."

But people who knew Dave Sanders did know.

And they were correct.

While some of the shock of what happened April 20 may have worn off, much of the sadness, the grief and the horror still will have to be addressed once the new school year begins.

It will be a big step to take for many, returning to the building for classes and activities.

And they know Dave Sanders won't be there.

"I already miss him," said Bath, who had worked with Sanders in softball and basketball.

The first set of hitting drills in the summer for Rebels players has occurred. There was no Sanders, and Bath described it as "weird not having him here, just dealing with it ... but as we get closer to the (softball) season, there just will be new challenges and new hurdles. I just miss him a lot."

Bath chuckles when he thinks about the idea of an award in Sanders' name.

"He didn't want to stand out," Bath said. "He just wasn't that way. He didn't believe in it."

He did, though, believe in touching the lives of young people. At a time when schools continue to struggle to keep as many in-house coaches as possible, Sanders was a local epitome of what adult mentors can mean to young people in the areas of academics and extra-curricular activities.

"Too often," said Bert Borgmann, Colorado High School Activities Association assistant commissioner, "all we see are wins and losses. We don't see the impact that a coach has on a student's life, yet coaches like Dave Sanders had such a positive impact not only on players' lives, but also on their lives as students in the school. Coaches are truly special people who have dedicated themselves to the positive growth of our young people."

Land remains convinced that "Dave was there for a reason. We would have lost hundreds, possibly, without his response and the response of so many others."

Also certain to Land is that the Columbine staff and students "looked to a coach for leadership. That's the nature of being a coach. They're the ones who respond ... I don't know; I guess I feel strongly even in this situation that the good Lord needed a coach to help others and save lives.
"And Dave responded."