Family affair for Braves basketball

By Nick Phillips

A quick look down the UNCP men’s basketball coaching roster will find a head coach, two assistant coaches, two graduate assistants and two student coaches.

You will also notice two with the last name Miller. One has 39 years of experience as a head coach, the other, three years. Braves’ head coach Ben Miller might only have those three years of head coaching experience, but the knowledge and guidance he and the rest of his staff and players get from having Eldon Miller alongside them is endless.

Eldon Miller, affectionately labeled “Pops” by Braves players, stepped out of retirement when his son took his first head coaching job in Pembroke, and thus has created a win-win situation for everyone involved with the program.

Father and son are able to spend time together, players learn from the endless well of knowledge the elder Miller has to offer and it gives Eldon another chance to be around the game he loves.

Background

Eldon Miller played collegiate basketball at Western Michigan University and led his team to a Division III National Championship during his senior season.

After serving as an assistant the next season, Miller was given his first head coaching job— at the ripe age of 23—with Alma College.

After eight seasons at Whittenburg, Miller moved on to Western Michigan University in 1971 and inherited a team in the midst of seven-straight losing seasons.

Miller turned Western Michigan into winners instantly, guiding them to the Mid-American Conference Championship, the school’s first conference title in 24 years.

From 1977-1986, Miller’s role as a fundamental coach who cares about his players” junior forward Jake Blandley said. “He wants to see the players come up with the basketball, he was coaching, he was gone a lot. So we missed some of that father-son time,” Miller said.

“It’s been a lot of fun having this time to spend together. When I was a kid growing up and he was coaching, he was gone a lot. So we missed some of that father-son time,” Miller said.

The decision to bring his father onto his first head coaching staff was a decision that was well thought out by Ben, as he came close to landing several other jobs over the years.

“Anytime you get close, you start thinking about your staff. We had dismissed it before,” he said about his father joining his staff.

When the younger Miller was hired to turn around struggling UNCP, he wanted his father along for the ride. But bringing his dad to the bench with him wasn’t an automatic thing. “The first person I had to discuss it with was my mom. She’s the one that I think has sacrificed more than anything,” Ben said about pulling his father out of retirement.

“She was ok with it; she knew that he was kind of itching to have another opportunity,” he quickly added.

Two-sided affair

The younger Miller enjoys the opportunity to spend time with his father as they both do what they enjoy. Players value the elder Miller as well.

The team came up with “Pops,” a way to joke and laugh with a man they have great respect for. “The players came up with that, I’ve just kind of bought into it,” Ben jokes about his dad’s name. “Pops is a fundamental coach who cares about players,” sophomore George Blakeney said.

“He wants to see the best for us. He pushes us every day, and he’s a big help to our team,” Blakeney added of the elder Miller’s role.