

Legend Steps Down at Ottoville

Kleman knew it was the right time to retire

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Retirement was something Ottoville girls' basketball coach Dave Kleman had thought about for a year or more before announcing his decision Tuesday night that this season would be his last after 532 wins in 27 seasons.

"I came close last year at the end of the year; but, after a little bit of time thinking about it, I didn't want to leave those four seniors (Kasey Knippen, Quinley Schlagbaum, Haley Hoersten, Brynlee Hanneman) who have meant so much to the program the last three or four years," Kleman said on Wednesday.

"And then us getting down to state and being runner-up is just gravy on top of the potatoes," he said.

Ottoville finished 25-4 this season and was State Runner-Up to Minster for a second season in a row. This season was the third in a row Ottoville won 20 games or more and the fourteenth time in the last 27 years it had won 20 or more.

"It's tough leaving the kids. It was tough leaving the younger girls but no matter when you go that's going to happen," Kleman said.

"It was not the game or the practices or being with the kids, it was all the other preparation that you do as a head coach – the film, the scouting, breaking down scouting reports, etc., etc., that was getting to be a chore. I always told myself that when it starts being a chore then it's time to go."

"I talked to some other coaches about when they knew it was time and they said, 'You'll know, you'll just get to that point.' And I said, 'You're not helping me out,' " he said.

The 63-year-old Kleman, a Fort Jennings graduate who has lived in Ottoville for decades, taught math at Van Wert High School for 37 years before retiring several years ago.

He began his coaching career as a boys' basketball coach at the junior high and reserve level at Van Wert. After being out of coaching for a few years he became Ottoville's eighth grade girls' coach in the 1991-1992 season and got the varsity girls basketball head coach's job the next year.

"My wife (Cheryl) said, 'You might as well coach girls, you've got three daughters.' I said, 'Okay, I'll give it a try and see what happens.' And the rest is history," Kleman said.

Ottoville won 20 games, 23 games, 21 games and 24 games the first four seasons he was its coach and went to the state tournament two of those four years. After that ultra-

successful beginning, a lot of little Ottoville girls decided they wanted to be part of that success when they got to high school.

"That was the start of it," Kleman said about those four seasons. "We preached that from Day One that in a small school our players were ambassadors for our program and school. All those little girls are watching you and you are role models for them. I was blessed from the beginning with great kids."

Kleman coached all three of his daughters – Megan, Melissa and Amanda – and said having the chance to get to more of his five grandchildren's events, like basketball games and birthday parties, is something he is looking forward to in retirement.

Ottoville won 12 Putnam County League titles, 14 District Championships and went to the State Tournament eight times in the 27 seasons that Kleman was its coach. Only Berlin Hiland (16), Pickerington Central (12), Fort Loramie (9), Versailles (9) and West Holmes (9) have played in more girls' state basketball tournaments.

In each of those eight trips to Columbus, Ottoville was beaten by the eventual state champion – Upper Scioto Valley in the 1993 semifinals, Southeastern in the 1996 semifinals, Berlin Hiland in the 2005 championship game, Columbus Africentric in the 2007 semifinals, Fort Loramie in the 2013 semifinals, Berlin Hiland in the semifinals in 2017 and Minster in the 2018 and 2019 championship game.

Ottoville's success came with only one player who went on to play in a NCAA Division I basketball program. Abby Siefker played at Bowling Green from 2014-2017.

"We've had a couple of Division II players, but really the kids are playing for the love of the game and not for that college scholarship," Kleman said.