The fire still burns

Another title in hand, Ashley ponders his future

By Todd Kelly

Moments after Ingomar's season finale at Mississippi Coliseum on March 11, Norris Ashley sounded like a man certain he'd coached his last basketball game.

"I'd say I'm 60-40 toward retiring," said Ashley, Coach of the Year on The Clarion-Ledger All-State boys team. "But as long as the itch is still there and I feel like scratching it... if I see a player doing something wrong on the court, but I just turn around and ignore it, then I'll know it's time. But I don't know if I'm at that point yet."

If Ashley is hesitant to put down his familiar oversize clipboard, who could blame him? At 62, and after 41 seasons on the bench, Ashley demonstrated his remarkable ability to mold a team and get the best from his players is still very much intact.

Unranked in the pre-season, Ingomar went 30-7 and captured the Class 1A state championship by beating McAdams 72-60. It was the ninth gold ball — five in boys, four in girls — for Ashley, tying him with former Murrah coach Anna Jackson for the MHSAA record.

Not that Ashley — who was named CL Girls Coach of the Year in 1994 — is worried about his place in history. With a record of 986-456 over 41 seasons (the last 39 at his alma mater), Ashley has won more boys games than any coach in Mississippi. He'll insist, though, that his past and present players deserve the lion's share of the credit.

"I guess I had a little influence: I got them to the game on time and made sure they had shoes and uniforms and stuff to wear," Ashley said. "I've been lucky in that I had players who wanted to win and that made me work hard."

Ashley long ago learned the value of elbow grease. The youngest of Bill and Bertha Ashley's five children grew up on a 100-acre plot in the tiny northeast Mississippi community of Lonestar, about eight miles west of Ingomar in Union County.

His father farmed and drove a bus route to and from Northeast Mississippi Community College in Booneville; his mother worked factory jobs in New Albany.

Their kids learned the game on the outdoor court adjacent to the nearby three-room schoolhouse for grades 1 through 8.

"We thought we'd died and gone to Madison Square Garden when we played a school with a gym," Ashley said.

The schoolhouse — or what remains of it — is now a community center.

"It's a domino parlor for older men — and I guess I'm about to join them," joked Ashley, who still resides in Lonestar with his wife of 35 years.

Pat Ashley, without a doubt, has heard talk before of her husband's impending retirement. Their son, Jonathan, coaches the boys team at Myrtle, which has been to the Big House in all four of his seasons.

"My wife reminds me all the time that I said I couldn't see myself coaching past 40," Ashley said. "I tell her now that I meant 40 season, not age 40."

Yet it's those seasons like the one just completed that can make it tough on Ashley to walk away permanently.

"There are so many more distractions that take up time and energy for kids," he said.

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"We played basketball because we didn't have anything else to do. Now there are cars and video games and social lives. We're competing with a lot of things we didn't have to compete with just 10 to 15 years ago.

"But Bobby Knight once said it's not the kids who've changed, it's the adults. I kind of agree with that."

"With those special teams, and I think we had one this year, it's almost like a family atmosphere. When you're done playing together, you'll read about what they're doing in the newspaper, ask about their kids and keep up with each other for the next 30 or 40 years. It really is like a family."

Look no further than James Green, the star of Ingomar's Grand Slam champions in 1978 and successful coach on the Division I level. Green, in his second season at Jacksonville State in Alabama, drove nearly five hours to watch his alma mater play at the Big House this year.

"Coach Ashley is able to get players to play hard and play smart," Green said. "He creates that desire to win by the conversations he has with you in practice and one-on-one situations. You always have so much respect for him. He had a lot of little ways to keep you motivated to play better."