

SUNDAY GAZETTE MAIL

# STATE MAGAZINE

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ON DEC. 18, 1953,

Jerome Robert Van Meter made plans to scout a basketball game in Hinton. But Mrs. Van (Aline to everyone in Beckley) had other plans for her husband, whom she always has called "Coach."

Bill Barrett (a long time friend of newspaper and radio) was leaving Beckley to take a job with United Press in Charleston and Aline explained that she had committed Van to serve as toastmaster at a farewell dinner for Bill.

Van loved Bill and knew he would thoroughly enjoy the task his beautiful wife had lined up for him. But he didn't, like the idea of, all at once, his wife making plans for him. And he didn't like the idea of letting his Hinton basketball team go unscouted. "God darned if I go," Van set his foot down.

"Hurry up and get dressed," Mrs. Van ordered.

"Dressed?" the somewhat infuriated coach yelled. "You mean we gotta get all spruced up?"

"Sure," Mrs. Van replied. "This is for Bill and it's a farewell dinner. All the others will be dressing."

THIS ONLY ADDED to Van's fury. But, grumble as he did, he went on to his room and dressed. Mrs. Van had made arrangements for one of Van's assistants to scout Hinton.

On the way to the dinner, Aline suggested that Van quit pouting, make the most of this situation and try to bring about a smile.

He did his best as they walked into the Masonic Building in Beckley, where the dinner was to be held.

Then the jig was up. There was Bill Barrett all right. But most of the guests were friends of the Van Meters and not necessarily those of Bill. Also on hand was a man named LaRue Van Meter of Falls Church, Va., who happens to be a brother of Jerome.

"How could this be?" Van pondered. "How come me?"

But as the evening went on and on, Van realized more and more the significance of the occasion and the planning it must have taken to stage such an affair. He immediately lost his mad for Aline.

IT WAS a fine dinner all right with many of Van's favorite people there. But the topper was that it happened to be one of those "This Is Your Life" things that recounted the brilliant athletic coaching career of Jerome Van Meter.

And to make the affair even more befitting such an honorable person, there were many of Van's former athletes gathered around the table, paying him tribute on what happened to be his 25th anniversary as coach of Woodrow Wilson High School in Beckley.

Nelson Bragg, his assistant, Willard (Butch) Webb Hullett Smith, George Springer, Bob Wills and some others had cooked up the whole thing. It took weeks of planning and entailed some pretty big expenses but it was worth it to all who knew and appreciated J. R. Van Meter, not only as a coach but as a man and a fine citizen.

A BEAUTIFUL six-piece silver set was presented to the Van Meters as a memento of the occasion. And it goes without saying that this present will be just as precious as any trophy Van or his teams might have won in his long coaching career.

Following that happy affair in 1953, Van stayed on as Beckley's coach for five more years.

On Tuesday, Aug. 18, 1959, Van announced that he was resigning as coach of his beloved Flying Eagles. He had accepted an offer to become principal of Beckley Junior High School.

"I'm divorcing myself from athletics entirely," he said boldly. "A man must always look to the day when he will hang 'em up. And this is my day."

BUT THE DAY before he had been out on the practice field with Football Coach Nelson Bragg, doing his bit as an assistant in right up to the last minute the sport he had once served in a head coaching capacity.

But on this day Van was as far from athletics as a man could be. Overnight he had transformed from Van Meter, the coach, to Van Meter, the principal.

Long before that, however, the gnawing thought of quitting had clutched Van. He knew it had to come. But when was a matter of conjecture.

"I must have realized it last football season," Van said. "I noticed that I was looking at my watch toward the end of practice. And when a man does that, he has lost something."

"Always in the past my watch had been the setting sun. Only darkness would



WHEN HE CAME TO Beckley to succeed Paul Steinbicker in 1920, he looked like this.

drive me to the locker rooms. Now time was dragging for me."

AND SO a man was quitting a labor of love he had followed for fully 37 years.

"It's time I made some money," Van explained. "I'll do considerably better as a principal and will find it possible to spend more time at home."

Mrs. Van Meter liked that prospect, although she had followed Van and his teams on almost all of their junkets down through the years, even back there at Point Pleasant when Van made his debut as a coach—and as a husband.

ALINE CARTMILL was a village school teacher in Point Pleasant back in 1922 when a slim, thin—almost skinny—young man named Van Meter came there to coach.

Van had graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 1922. He had played football, baseball and took part in track but had spent his winter months—during the basketball season—working to pay his way through school.

When he graduated, he wanted to go as far from Illinois as a job would take him. So, when the Teachers Aid notified him of an opening in Pt. Pleasant, Van took the job.

FOUR YEARS after he had served as a one-man coaching staff, taught five classes of chemistry, physics and math and also taught Sunday School, he discovered his heart had long since flown to a place called Pueblo, Col., where Aline had moved with her family.

So Van scraped together enough money to go west with hopes of bringing Aline back as his wife.

He succeeded but long before he had accomplished his mission, Van had spent all his money. So he had to play a game or two of professional baseball to make enough money to pick up the tab for two bus tickets back to Point Pleasant.

"We spent our honeymoon riding a bus from Denver (near Pueblo) to Point Pleasant," Van laughed. "Good thing I was young," Mrs. Van put in.

VAN STAYED seven years on his \$165-per-month job at Point Pleasant. His Point Pleasant teams did well. They won 40, lost 22 and tied 2 in football, won 83 and lost 53 in basketball and did well in track. They were especially outstanding in baseball, too, but Van never did keep a record of this.

IN 1929, when Paul Steinbicker, who is now an executive of the Libbey-Owens-Ford Glass Co., here in Charleston, quit the coaching game, there was an opening at Beckley, where Paul had carried on so nobly for several years. Van applied for the job and got it.

And so in 1929 began a coaching career for this skinny fellow from Illinois that was to last 30 happy years. It was to bring to Van the love and devotion of thousands of boys who played under him. And it was to establish his name near the top in the annals of Beckley's growth and development. Truly, he had been one of the pioneers of this little town that grew up with Van Meter—in size and in stature.

TODAY, as Van looks back

### The Record

Here's the football and basketball coaching record of Jerome R. Van Meter during his 37 years as coach at Point Pleasant and Woodrow Wilson of Beckley High Schools:

Football			
School	W	L	T
At Pt. Pleasant	40	22	2
At Beckley	182	71	12
Totals	222	93	14

Basketball			
School	W	L	T
At Pt. Pleasant	83	55	
At Beckley	364	177	
Totals	617	232	

Unbeaten football teams: 1917, '48 and '51 at Beckley (state champions all three years). Championship basketball teams: 1916, '51, '52, '53 '54 and '57 at Beckley

on his career he makes no bones of the fact that he will miss it.

"I will regret thousands of times, my decision to quit coaching," he admits, "but this decision had to come sooner or later and when an opportunity came along to better myself in such an outstanding manner, I could not afford to pass it up."

Van has never denied that he has had many fine offers to leave Beckley. Charleston High School made a pitch for him a few years ago, when Eddie Bartug resigned as Mountain Lion football coach. He also is reported to have been offered a job at Pruntytown, the state's industrial school for boys.

Van would have accepted the latter with a great deal of enthusiasm if he had ever planned to leave Beckley and if there had been no politics attached to the post. He always thought it would be a real challenge to work with misguided youth.

But Beckley always held a soft spot in Van's heart. He could never bring himself to accept employment anywhere that would take him away from his "heaven on the hill."

Van and his pretty wife live in a beautiful—but not pretentious—little home on Johnstown Road. They finished paying for it this Summer and hope to spend the rest of their lives there. It isn't far from Van's new school—Beckley Junior High.

In this house are many of Van's memories. And from the scrap books, pictures on the wall and from his athletic library of many famous and interesting books, it is plain that he doesn't plan to put them all behind them.

ALSO in the walls of this home are many memories for his wife—memories of feeding Van's football boys spaghetti and his basketball boys steak, year in and year out.

"This is the thing I will miss the most," Aline says. "It seemed that Van's boys were always my boys."

The Van Meters never had any children of their own. So much of their devotion for youngsters was cast out to the boys who wore the uniforms of the Beckley Flying Eagles during those 37 years Van coached.

The greatest thrill of Van's coaching career certainly came on that March day in 1946, when his Beckley team beat Charleston's Stonewall Jackson for the state high school basketball championship.

"This was my first championship of any kind," Van reflected. "It had to be my top thrill—one I can't explain but certainly something of a sensation. The highlight of my career, of course, would have to be winning four state basketball championships in a row (1951-52-53-54)."

That truly was a great accomplishment.

THERE ARE THOSE who will compare going through two football seasons without a loss or tie with the feat of winning those four straight basketball titles, however.

Nobody ever coaches four straight championship teams, that's true, but many coaches—outstanding ones, too—never realize the thrill of coaching even one unbeaten and untied football team. If there is a coach who has ever duplicated Van's feat in West Virginia, there is no record of it.

Be that as it may, Van's teams won six basketball titles and three football crowns before turning the gridiron coaching over to one of his former players, Nelson Bragg, four years ago.

In all, his basketball teams won 564 games, and lost only 177. His football teams won 182 games, lost 71 and played 12 ties.

THERE HAVE BEEN many ups and downs in Van's long coaching career, but he takes great pride in the fact that he has turned out many teams which would not quake in the face of disaster.

"We played much to form," he recalls. "We didn't pull many upsets and didn't have many pulled on us."

His recollection of the biggest surprise— at least to Van himself— came just this last basketball season when his Beckley team, despite playing without two regulars—Captain Ned Ragland and Rod Harmon—downed mighty Princeton in a regional tournament game.

His biggest disappointment was in 1953 when Mullens beat his Beckley team in the finals of the area tournament in Charleston. Another was in 1930, when he figured his Beckley team could whip favored Hinton only to be surprised by a three touchdown defeat.

WITHOUT QUESTION, Van Meter will go down in history as one of the most beloved coaches in West Virginia high schools. He was known as a shrewd observer, too, and a man with great wisdom—in or out of athletics.



VAN METER was stronger as a baseball player than he was in any other sport when he attended Illinois Wesleyan.

Maybe this is one reason he refuses to pick any "all-time" teams in his 30 years of coaching. It is gathered, however, that he thought a lot of the ability of Howard Hurt, Willie Bergines, Ted Cook, Dwayne Winger and Fred Hurt (Howard's son) as basketball players.

And he mentions often the football play of such men as Royles, Don Hodson, Nick Rabahl, Clarence Underwood, Nelson Bragg and Stan and Frank Huffman.

"You can't pin me down on anything like that," Van says. "I had far too many good boys to pick an all-star team of any kind."

VAN IS PROUD OF the fact that never in his football coaching career did he ever have a 15-yard penalty called against him or unsportsmanlike conduct or officiating criticism. And only three times in basketball were technical fouls ever called on him for disturbances from the bench.

"I learned early that these things don't pay," he said.

One time, he recalled, when Beckley was playing at Fairmont West, the veteran Stanley Jeranko of Clarksburg was officiating, Biz Dawson, the West coach, was giving Jeranko a tough time from the bench.

"Finally, Biz charged onto the floor to tell Jeranko off," Van remembers. "And then Jeranko turned to Biz and said: 'Walk back to the bench, Biz, and every step you take will cost you a technical foul.'"

"Fortunately," Van said, "Biz jumped back in two steps."

"I DON'T SAY I never did yell at an official," Van declared. "I've done more than my share of it. But I have always tried to stay within the limits. And I have never hired an official that I wouldn't hire again."

The Flying Eagle coach says he never brooded over a setback in any sport.

"I leave my defeats on the field of battle," Van mused. "I don't think anyone wants to listen to my troubles anymore than I want to listen to theirs."

VAN'S LONG coaching career has been useful in many ways outside of Beckley. Twice he has served as president of the W. Va. Coaches Assoc. and he was associated with the old North-South game every year it was played in some capacity, twice as head coach and three times as assistant. In other years, he helped with personnel selections.

He was twice named "Coach of the Year" by the W. Va. Sports Writers' Assoc., and now he certainly will become a candidate for a place in the writers' "Hall of Fame."

He celebrated his 59th birthday on Aug. 15. He was born in Williamsville, Ill., in 1900 and attended high school there.

As he assumes his job as principal at Beckley Junior High, he parts company with an old friend in C. G. Peregrino, for the past 26 years principal at Woodrow Wilson High. They were close friends and worked closely together in keeping the athletic program on a sound basis.

VAN MOVES into his new post with his eyes wide open and his sleeves rolled up.

"It looks like a lot of work," he says, "but I guess I can always go back to coaching if I fail. Maybe some junior high would want me as a coach."

About his long career as a coach, he says:

"You can't take 37 years and wipe them out in a day. Of course, I'll miss it. I'll regret my move. But I feel certain I can adjust myself properly and soon learn to live without coaching."

But the thousands of athletes Van has coached in these 37 years will never exactly learn to live without Van.

And it may be something of an ordeal for Mrs. Van Meter to learn to call her illustrious husband something besides "coach."

Chances are, she won't even try. For "coach" he will always be.



## Van Meter Is the Name

BY A. L. HARDMAN

WALT RAPPOLD, playing quarterback here, gets a "center snap" from his former coach. Walt will play quarterback for Duke this fall. He is one of the many college prospects Van has produced in 37 years of coaching. Van also coached Walt's dad years ago.

Photos by Ferrell Friend

## Collecting Trophies was his game

HERE ARE A FEW of the many trophies Van has brought to Beckley in his 30 years of coaching there. Among other titles, he won three football championships and six basketball crowns.

