

For Pete's Sake

Santa Cruz boys won state title in coach's triumphant farewell

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the final installment in a year-end series of stories on the people and events that made headlines in 2005.

By **TOM MOORE**
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When the Santa Cruz High boys basketball team won the state Division III championship, team MVP Junior Russell dribbled out the clock, threw the ball into air at Arco Arena and the celebration began.

And for a while, longtime coach Pete Newell Jr. was nowhere in sight. For 30 years, he had coached boys basketball at Santa Cruz and had suffered his share of heartbreaking playoff losses.

Fans speculated about where Newell had gone. Some believed he'd lost a bet and was going to shave off the long gray beard. Instead, he'd slipped away, hoping to let the kids enjoy the moment themselves.

"I went behind a curtain and sat down, just to kind of ride it out and meet the kids in the press room there," Newell said. "Then someone said I had to come out for the photo."

Eventually, he joined the team, got in the middle of the huddle on the Arco Arena floor and, with their arms around him, celebrated with a Santa Cruz chant that the players recited before every game.

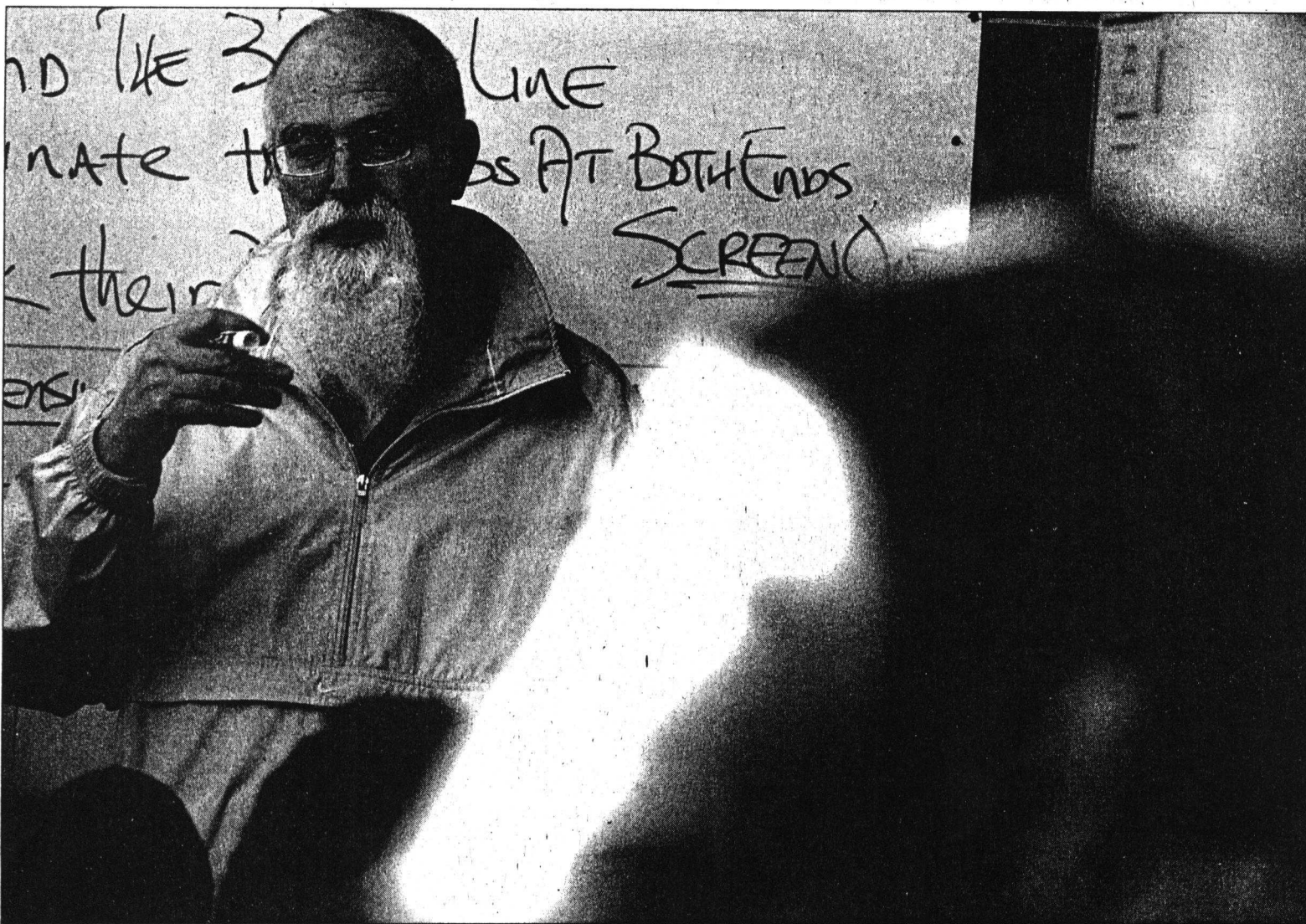
"The whole thing was about them," Newell said. "I understand that since it was my last season, and I've been around Santa Cruz

'The whole playoff run, each game could have been the last and we met every challenge.'

PETE NEWELL JR.

After 30 years at the helm of Santa Cruz High's boys basketball team, Pete Newell's group was finally able to hoist a championship trophy (top).

Bill Lovejoy/
Sentinel file
photos



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Pete Newell goes over some finer points with the team in a pregame session during the 2004-05 season.

Newell

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for so long, and my father and all, that I was going to get some attention, but I wish we could have won it a different year so the kids were the story."

So Newell is a reluctant Sentinel sports Newsmaker of the Year for 2005.

In Newell's 30 years coaching the Santa Cruz boys, his team reached the Central Coast Section playoffs 20 times, including 19 of the last 20. He compiled a record of 554-326 at Santa Cruz.

Newell's style was to challenge, to push, to teach the fundamentals, to demand and command attention, and also to show the team the joy of the game. Before the state championship game, he talked to players about the opportunity to play the most enjoyable game of their lives. They took the opportunity.

During the state championship run, the Cardinals posted a record of 36-1, the most wins ever for any basketball team in the Central

Coast Section. Their state championship game, against previously unbeaten St. Augustine of San Diego, was the USA Today game of the week.

The Cardinals trailed 49-41 in the third quarter with key players in foul trouble — and then went on a 20-2 run to the delight of a strong Santa Cruz crowd at Arco Arena in Sacramento and finished with a 67-56 victory.

Russell, playing with a sore ankle and an injured knee, scored 27 points in the title game, including a long 3-pointer at the third-quarter buzzer to cut the lead to 49-46.

Newell says that when he looks back now, he remembers the team played much better in games than they ever did in practice — except the last practice before the title game, which had him worried.

Newell says he'll remember Russell's virtuosity at 5-foot-6, dictating tempo and flow throughout the season. Russell averaged 16.6 points, 4.2 steals and 5.6 assists per game. Newell said he also thinks of the unselfishness of Cliff Sammet and Austin Swift, the other

two senior stars. Sammet, at 6-foot-8, averaged 13.8 points, eight rebounds and two blocks per game. Swift a 6-foot-4 guard averaged 12.3 points per game.

Newell said he will remember Michael Norteye's "warrior competitiveness," Billy Pederson's senior leadership, the emergence of juniors Jesse LoBue and Chris Sharp as contributors, the practice play of Will Wetmore in between football and baseball seasons and the valuable assistance of coach Eric Manabe. And, he'll remember looking up in the stands and seeing former players and world-class surfers from Santa Cruz High at Arco Arena.

"The community support was extraordinary," Newell said. "The whole playoff run, each game could have been the last, and we met every challenge."

The season was celebrated with a parade through Santa Cruz and a team banquet, and it will be long remembered. The Sentinel published a special section, Newell required that players keep journals, KRUZ TV played and replayed playoff games throughout the year,

and Santa Cruz High graduate Ryan Vaughan filmed the entire season. Vaughan's documentary packed the Rio Theatre when it premiered in December.

Currently, Newell is enjoying a relaxed schedule while still teaching at Santa Cruz. He spent Christmas with his father and watched his nephew, Peter Newell, score 32, 22, 26 and 30 points playing for Reno's McQueen High at a San Diego tournament.

"There's no question that I've passed the mantle of being the worst defensive player in my family to my nephew," Newell said.

In the past week, he has seen three or four high school games, every day, and he says he is managing several fantasy football teams, all currently in last place.

"I can document that," Newell said.

He seems to be adjusting to life after Santa Cruz boys basketball.

"The only time I think about if I miss it is when someone asks me," Newell said.

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