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Shooks a Legend as Freshman Coach (Winter 2004)

Wayne Shooks tried the varsity football thing once. Some time during the late 1980s, longtime DeWitt coach Gail Thornton asked Shooks to be his offensive coordinator.

"I didn't sleep a night. My wife, after three weeks, said, 'You're going back to freshmen,'" Shooks remembered. And those three weeks were in the month of June.

But Shooks' wife must have been on to something. Because few, if any, freshman football coaches have accomplished what Shooks finished with one last win last fall.

He ended his 16th and final season as freshman coach with a 135-2-1 record. Amazing.

"You can't lose a game for him, or you'll feel bad," DeWitt senior Mat Brynick recalled from his days as a freshman. "Coach never says it, but it's what everyone expects.

"He taught us how to win."

Guys like Shooks, 62, usually go unappreciated.

They get the kids fresh to high school, fresh to high school sports, and still learning things like not spiking the ball after a touchdown.

But few freshman football coaches are as legendary as Shooks is in DeWitt. They are so unappreciated that it's impossible to find out if anyone has accomplished what he's done.

Shook is not big on numbers. Never has been during his 41 years teaching in the district, or more than 20 coaching everything from football to basketball to wrestling to tennis. Oh, and track since 1980.

He also coached 8th-grade football for a few years, junior varsity for one season and was a varsity assistant. But he'll be remembered for what he did with the freshmen.

The losses came in 1993 to Mason during a terrible wind storm, and in 2002 to Greenville. That same year, the Panthers tied Haslett, meaning it was the only year during his tenure that DeWitt wasn't sure if it finished first in its league, since league titles aren't handed out at the freshmen level.

"The kids felt bad. They did their best," Shooks remembered.

But the losses, however few, were more of a relief for Shooks than a letdown.

Don't take that to mean Shooks doesn't like to win.

Sure, he embraced the role of teacher as much as any freshman coach. But as DeWitt varsity coach Rob Zimmerman said, "If he was a 5th-grade coach, he'd be the most competitive 5th-grade coach you've ever seen." "I never pointed (our record) out, it was not our goal," Shooks said. "Our goal was to win the next week. Although the kids knew it. They just assumed we were going to go 9-0, I guess."

Guess so.

Shooks had more easily-attainable goals:

- Have fun
- Learn fundamentals
- Emphasize the logical stuff, like the importance of bringing equipment to school every day

“He does a really good job teaching expectations about being young men and being great students,” Zimmerman said. “It's gigantic.”

And it kept kids coming back to junior varsity and varsity. You could hear the fun coming out in Brynick's voice. He was remembering his freshman football experience, remembering his time with perhaps Michigan's most successful coach at that level.

“I remember a few games, we'd find one play that works, and we ran it to death, pounding it and pounding it,” Brynick recalled. “He loves running the same play over and over. If you can do that, march 80 yards down the field, you're doing something right. No one could stop us.”

That was not all Brynick remembered, or didn't.

Shooks almost never yelled. If he did, it meant a kid messed something up over and over and over again.

He has a doctorate in zoology. Education is obviously a big deal. He loves to win, but he loves to teach. And he's hesitant to go looking for any attention for what he's done.

All made him a perfect freshmen football coach.

“Sometimes I don't think people understand about coaches. You think college level, they are coaches first, that's their job, but not at the high school level,” Shooks said.

“It's not what I've done, it's what they've done. I've always believed the focus should be on the kids. My job is a teacher. I coach because I love to coach.”

— *Geoff Kimmerly*

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at the Lansing State Journal*

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