

She's Got Game

Shelly Dearden coaches a basketball powerhouse at Ewing High School. But it's not the girls team, it's the boys squad.

By
**MATTHEW
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Shelly Dearden has a ritual: She likes to be the last person off the bus and the last one out of the locker room when her team travels for away games.

Over the years, the routine often has led to confusion.

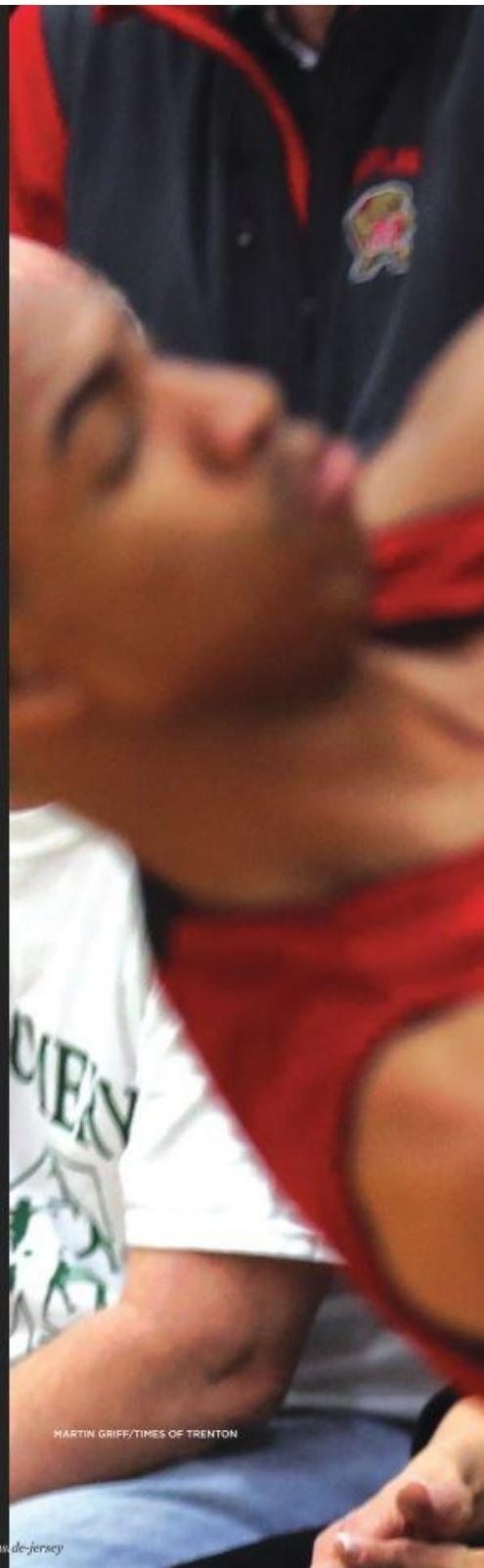
Game officials will approach the first man they see in blue-and-white Ewing High School garb — usually longtime athletic trainer David Csillan — and greet him with a warm, “Hey, Coach.” That’s when Csillan will shake his head, inform them he’s not the person who runs the powerhouse Ewing High boys basketball program and point to the middle-aged woman straggling into the gymnasium.

“She’s the coach,” Csillan will tell the officials, their mouths often agape.

Not that you can blame them for being a little puzzled. Dearden, 53, is believed to be the only woman currently serving as head coach of one of New Jersey’s 405 high school boys varsity basketball teams. She’s also believed to be one of only a handful of women coaching boys varsity basketball across the United States, although no official gender statistics are available.

Not only is Dearden coaching the boys at Ewing in one of the most competitive states for basketball in the country, but she’s doing so with astounding success. She guided the Blue Devils to the Group 2 state championship in 2012, becoming the first woman to coach a boys basketball team to a New Jersey state title. Meanwhile, her team has become a statewide juggernaut and among the most highly ranked squads in New Jersey, year in and year out.

The fact that Dearden’s a woman? It’s pretty irrelevant at this point, those close to the coach say.



MARTIN GRIFF/TIMES OF TRENTON



Shelly Dearden is believed to be the only woman serving as head coach of a New Jersey high school boys varsity basketball team.

"The results speak for themselves," Ewing district athletic director Bud Kowal says. "Because let's be honest: How many coaches — male, female, red, green, purple, whatever — how many of those people have been in state finals four out of six years? You just can't argue with that."

Dearden, who previously coached the Ewing girls basketball team to a state championship in 1999 and the girls soccer team to one in 1991, also is believed to be the first coach in the country to lead three different teams to state titles.

The fact that she's having such success on the boys side now only adds to her indelible legacy, friends say.

"You have a woman like Hillary Clinton (who) was on the verge of the presidency," says Dan Montferrat, one of Dearden's assistant coaches since 2012. "You have all these great trailblazers and Shelly's just another one. She does it with great respect from the community, from the county, even from the state."

Dearden's success has become so routine at Ewing — where she starred in three sports herself before graduating from the school in 1981 — the novelty has almost completely worn off. But when she first took over the boys program in 2005, hurdles loomed. Some fans snickered in the stands about the Blue Devils being coached by a mom. And some opposing coaches, and even officials, had a hard time taking her seriously, Dearden and others say.

"One of my first scrimmages, I came out of the locker room and a reporter heard people in the stands saying, 'Oh, I guess they had nobody else to hire, they hired her,'" Dearden says. "That's when I realized people outside of Ewing probably took it as, 'What the heck is going on there? Why did they give the job to a woman?' That's when I realized people outside of Ewing had no idea of my background or my coaching experience."

"So they're questioning, 'How can a woman do a man's job?'"

A FAMILY OF JOCKS

It's little surprise Dearden was born with a sports gene. Her father, Fred Walters, was a three-sport standout at Ewing High, who later played 10 years of professional baseball in the Philadelphia Phillies and Houston Astros organizations. Meanwhile, her mother, Joyce, played field hockey and basketball, ran track and was a cheerleader at Ewing.

Coaching also runs through her veins: Dearden's father coached American Legion baseball for 31 years, the same amount of time her mother coached CYO basketball.

Despite the sports aptitude, Fred and Joyce did not pressure Dearden or her two brothers into playing sports. Fred made a point to stand at the back of the pack at games, mostly silent. But all the Walters kids were drawn naturally to the fields and courts.

"My daughter often reminds me that she's the third boy I never had," Fred Walters says, laughing. "I can put it this way: Shelly's just a tough kid."

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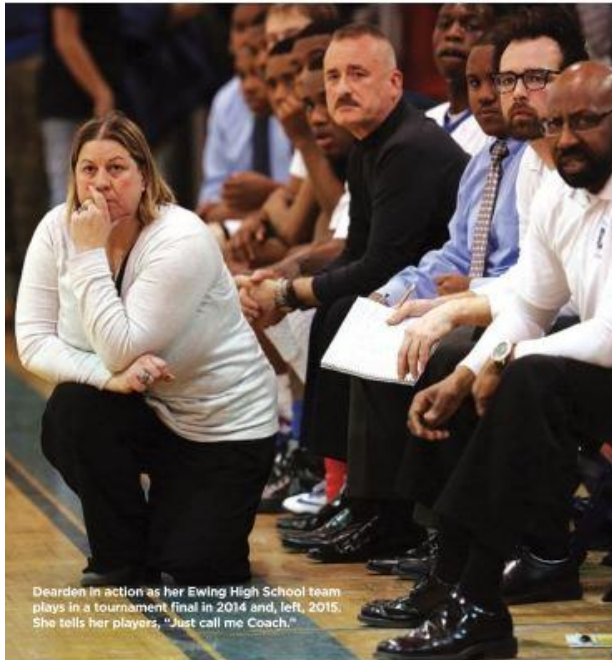


From the beginning, Dearden honed her physicality and competitiveness playing sports against her brothers. Her grit regularly was on display during pickup basketball games in the neighborhood.

"She played underneath and the guys hated to play against her because she'd bang the hell out of them," Fred Walters says. "They'd try to be nice guys and thought they might hurt her; no, no — she hurt them."

The family rarely had dinners together because one of them was always off at a game or practice. But they did routinely gather on the softball diamond, where the five of them played on the same recreation softball team.

"A family of jocks," Fred Walters says proudly. "We have Shelly playing over at third base and throwing the ball to my



Dearden in action as her Ewing High School team plays in a tournament final in 2014 and, left, 2015. She tells her players, "Just call me Coach."

STAN LUGER/FILE PHOTOS

wife, at first. My wife used to complain because (Shelly) hurt her hand from throwing so hard. That was a great family thing. Then we didn't have to worry about dinner time."

Dearden went on to play basketball and softball at Trenton State (now The College of New Jersey). She didn't play her third sport, soccer, because it was not yet offered at the school.

After college, she started teaching special education and coaching at Ewing, first girls soccer and then girls basketball. Dearden built both programs into state powers, collecting county, league and state titles along the way.

Then, in 2003, she decided she wanted a break to spend more time with her family: husband John and their three boys, Kevin, Keith and Kasey. Most of that time away from the high school sidelines was spent coaching her boys — and hundreds of other boys in and around Ewing.

When the boys coaching job opened at Ewing in 2005, many of those same boys and their parents encouraged Dearden to apply. At that point, the thought of coaching boys on the high school level didn't seem so unusual — to Dearden, at least.

"Coaching boys wasn't new to me," she says. "But I know a lot of people out there did not see it that way: a woman coaching a boys team. In the back of my mind, I knew it would be difficult because that's not heard of, it's not done, especially in this area and especially in the state of New Jersey."

TOUGH TIMES INITIALLY

Dearden's biggest obstacle upon taking over the boys basketball program wasn't her gender; it was the team's lack of experience. During her first season, Ewing returned just one player with any significant varsity experience, she says.

Naturally, the Blue Devils struggled her first two seasons, and Dearden and others sensed the restlessness among the fanbase. Fred Walters says he occasionally heard "murmurs" from people in the bleachers critical of his daughter.

"There were some tough times initially," admits Kowal, the district athletic director. "Whether you're male or female, when you don't have the success, win-loss record-wise, everybody is now starting to take a look and point the finger, and put you under the microscope and have questions."

Before her third season, Dearden says she approached Kowal with a blunt assessment: "If we don't make a name for ourselves this year, then maybe I need to step down."

That season, Ewing won the Central Jersey title and advanced to the state semifinals. Ever since, the Blue Devils have remained one of New Jersey's most dominant programs, although, funny enough, Dearden doesn't even know how many career victories she owns.

"In the beginning, it was kind of weird playing for a woman," says Trey Lowe, perhaps the best player in school history and now a redshirt sophomore at Temple University in Philadelphia. "But after I went through tryouts and got used to her, she didn't carry herself as a woman; she carried herself as a coach. She said, 'Just call me Coach. Don't call me Mrs. This, Mrs. That. I'm your coach.' After that, I got used to it."

Lowe, and others, say Dearden succeeds because of her toughness, discipline and high expectations. Players must wear shirts and ties on game days, and anyone absent from school does not play. She demands her team work even harder in the offseason, logging extra time in the gym and weight room.

"She's really upbeat," Lowe says. "Sometimes, she'll really be in your face. She pushes you to the edge a lot. She'll get on your nerves, but she does it out of love and because she wants you to be better and move on to the next level."

As for the cases of mistaken identity before away games, those situations still happen — but far less than in the beginning of her run on the boys side.

Why? Ewing and Dearden have become such a powerhouse, it's hard to find an official who doesn't know her.

"She had to go through that period initially," Fred Walters says. "But now, she's at the point of being renowned around the state, accepted and respected for all that she's accomplished." @