



# COURTINING SUCCESSES

BASKETBALL COACH JERRY RICKRODE NOTCHES 300TH CAREER WIN

By John Seitzinger and Kim Bower-Spence

PHOTOS BY WARREN RUDA

**W**HEN MEN'S BASKETBALL coach Jerry Rickrode arrived at Wilkes University in summer 1992, he inherited a team that hadn't seen a winning season in five years.

He quickly turned things around. And on Jan. 30, his efforts earned him his 300th career win, with a 79-54 victory over FDU-Florham. His career record at Wilkes now stands at 303 wins and 119 losses.

"First let me say that the 300 wins are the University's wins, not mine," says Rickrode, the first Wilkes basketball coach to achieve this milestone. "We work extremely hard but never get hung up on individual coaching records. I didn't have to shoot, pass, handle or play defense

in any of those wins. But the players did. They deserve the recognition."

Rickrode, who previously served as an assistant coach at Ithaca College, immediately injected new life into the program, and successes came quickly. In his first season, he led the Colonels to a 16-9 record and a conference playoff berth. The following season, Wilkes went 20-6, the first 20-win season in school history. The team earned berths in both the Middle Atlantic Conference and Eastern College Athletic Conference playoffs.

Matthew McCaffrey '94 M'97, now associate director of admissions at Wilkes, played forward when Rickrode arrived. "To say that the culture of Wilkes basketball changed that summer would be putting it too mildly. Jerry made it very clear early and often what it would take to be a successful program," he recalls. "Jerry also arrived here with a ferocious desire to recruit better student-athletes."

Over the course of the next seven years, Wilkes was one of the dominant programs in Division III. During that span, Rickrode led the Colonels to seven straight conference playoff appearances, where his teams claimed MAC titles in 1996, 1998 and 1999, along with a Freedom Conference championship in 2001.

Wilkes also enjoyed a run of six NCAA Division III playoff appearances. The 1995 and 1996 teams advanced to the Elite Eight, while the 1998 squad became the first team in school history to reach the illustrious Final Four.

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Rickrode's run at Wilkes includes 16 consecutive seasons of posting winning records, including seven years in which the team has registered 20 wins or more. During that same time frame, the Colonels earned 14 conference playoff berths. Rickrode is a three-time conference Coach of the Year recipient, while also garnering the National Association of Basketball Coaches Mid-Atlantic Regional Coach of the Year Award four times.

Notes McCaffrey, "Jerry instituted an entirely different attitude regarding how we went about everything related to basketball; that is, everything from how we prepared in the off-season to how we dressed to how we practiced. Behind the scenes, recruitment, scouting of opponents and practice preparation were the order of the day."

His teams learned the value of hard work and that winning was much more fun than not winning, McCaffrey adds. "Players coming into the Wilkes program since 1992 under Jerry Rickrode know three things: one, they will go to class; two, they will improve as an individual player; and three, they will win as a team."