

Willi Retires

Coached At Bridgewater For 21 Years

Eagles Coach Steps Away After 21 Seasons

BRIDGEWATER WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

By **GREG MADIA**

Daily-News Record

BRIDGEWATER — Jean Willi said the decision wasn't made overnight.

"It was one that I had thought long and hard about," she said. "But, you just kind of know."

Willi announced her retirement following 21 years as the coach of the women's basketball team at Bridgewater College on Tuesday.

She was a mainstay at Nininger Hall for parts of five decades, having played at the school and served as an assistant coach under former Eagles' coach Laura Mapp before taking the reigns of the program prior to the start of the 1996-97 season.

"I just realized I wanted to know what life was about between October and March without basketball," Willi said. "I actually made the decision in the fall and just felt like right after

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After 21 seasons as women's basketball coach at Bridgewater College, Jean Willi announced her retirement on Tuesday.

Daniel Lin / DN-R

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the season would be the best time to make the announcement.

“ When I made the decision, I felt like I wanted to leave the program in what I think is good shape and I think we have done that.”

Bridgewater’s 2016- 17 campaign ended last Tuesday when Randolph knocked the Eagles out of the Old Dominion Athletic Conference tournament. In Willi’s final season, the team finished 14- 12, giving her 18 winning seasons in her term. Eagles senior and East Rockingham High School graduate Jessica Lam was named ODAC Player of Year while scoring a conference- best 21.1 points per game under Willi.

“ Certainly, I enjoyed this last season,” Willi said. “ I probably enjoyed it more before [guard] Bri Moore and [forward] Allie Couburn tore their ACLs.

“ But after we lost those two pretty good players, I was just proud of the way we continued to fight and that I still had that fight in me as a coach. Although record- wise it didn’t end as I hoped, it wasn’t enough to make me ask, ‘ Do I want to do this another year?’ The answer was no.”

In her career, Willi led Bridgewater to the Division III NCAA Tournament five times, won the ODAC tournament twice and was the ODAC Coach of the Year five times.

She finished with a record of 375191.

“ As an outsider, even though they’re a rival, I have got a lot of respect for the loyalty of the university and her,” Eastern Mennonite women’s basketball coach Kevin Griffin said about Willi’s time at Bridgewater.

Griffin, Willi and their teams have battled for last twelve seasons, playing against each other at least twice per year since Griffin took the head gig at EMU.

“ When I look at somebody and they devote basically a chunk of their life somewhere, that speaks volumes,” he said. “ Longevity is a great convincer.”

Willi will work through the end of the school year at Bridgewater to finish out her other role as the associate director of athletics.

“ Then I’m going to hit the road,” Willi said.

The now- ex basketball coach said she’s looking forward to traveling, golfing and visiting some of her former players that she didn’t get to see that often due to her coaching obligations.

“ One thing I always appreciated about Jean was that it wasn’t a situation where every time you sat down, you had to talk shop,” Bridgewater football coach Mike Clark said.

Clark will begin his 23rd season at Bridgewater this fall.

“ Anytime friends you work with leave, that’s always difficult,” Clark added. “ But, there was consistency with Jean. You knew what you were going to get and I do believe that.

“ Laura Mapp was her mentor, but when Jean took over for Ms. Mapp, it became her program and she evolved, too. It was neat to see. But I always liked the fact that you could sit down and talk about things other than work with Jean.”

Clark said Willi was a tough opponent on the golf course also.

“ Let’s put it this way, she’s dangerous playing from the red- tee when she’s on,” Clark said. “ I couldn’t bring my B game and compete.”

Willi said the friendships she has with Clark, Bridgewater athletic director and baseball coach Curt Kendall as well as her assistants Cyndi Justice and David Wade made Bridgewater a unique place to stay.

Justice has been on Willi’s staff since the 1996- 97 season.

“ The thing that sticks out the most about my career is the day I offered Cyndi Justice the assistant coaches position,” Willi said. “ Way back in the day at Sheila Moorman’s camp, way back in the day, when she was coaching, I met Cyndi.

“ Then when I had this opportunity, she applied for the position and I remembered her and that’s the best decision I ever made. Without her, none of this would have been possible.”

The longstanding relationships with her staff and other coaches at Bridgewater is what Willi said enabled her path to success.

“ Of course I’m bias, but it speaks to everything Bridgewater is to us,” Willi said. “ It has been my everything.”

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COMMENTS?

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