

# Home, Sweet HOME

Former high school basketball standout returns to alma mater

by / Samuel Littauer / Sports Editor

**W**ith 1,782 career points on the basketball court, Joey Bryson left West in 1995 as the school's all-time leading scorer. This year, 21 years later, Bryson has made his way back to the Falcons' court as head coach.

"West Henderson is home to me," Bryson said. "I knew that one day I'd hope to come back. I just had to wait until the time was right."

As a player for West in the 1990s, Bryson set multiple records, including the all-time scoring record and most points scored in a season with 727 baskets in 1995.

His record still stands today, and Bryson is fondly remembered by fans for the energy he brought to the basketball program.

"For 15 to 20 years, West Henderson was known for their basketball," Bryson said. "Fans used to pack the stands for every game and the energy was always high."

According to Bryson, many games were so highly attended that the local fire marshal had to come clear out areas of the gym because the gym had been filled beyond capacity. Under Head Coach Rick Wood, Bryson led the team to a reputation as one of the state's most dominant programs.

After his high school career, Bryson played four years at Western Carolina University, contributing to a Southern Conference championship and helping his team earn a spot in the NCAA national tournament.

In both 1994 and 1995, Bryson was named Western North Carolina player of the year, and in his senior year he was named to the second team AP All-State Basketball Team.

Following his college success, Bryson spent several years coaching basketball with multiple teams in Georgia. It wasn't until 2011 when he returned to North Carolina to coach the North Buncombe program for five seasons.

While at North Buncombe, Bryson hoped he would



Head basketball coach Joey Bryson instructs his team during a preseason practice. Bryson was named head coach in June following Coach Billy Phillips' resignation. Shooting over the heads of the opposing team (inset picture), Joey Bryson sets up for two points in a game he played during a game in his junior season on the varsity basketball team in 1994.

get a chance to return to West.

"It's been great coming back to West," Bryson said. "My family and I have felt very welcomed by so many people in the Falcon community."

Bryson was named coach in June after Head Coach Billy Phillips' resignation. Phillips coached the varsity basketball team for five years.

When he left, he had a 44-75 overall record in the regular season and an 0-3 all-time record in the playoffs.

As the team's new head coach, Bryson takes over a team that has seen only two winning seasons in the past 10 years.

According to senior basketball player Kole Thomas, fans can expect an entirely different style of play from past years.

"Coach Bryson runs a very fast, high-octane offense," Thomas said. "His attitude and pace as a coach makes basketball fast and fun to play."

For weeks, West basketball players have been training, hoping to be ready for this year's season which begins on Nov. 26 against East Forsyth as the team competes in the Coaches vs. Cancer Shootout at Kimmel Arena at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. The Coaches vs. Cancer event has raised approximately \$54,000 to go toward cancer awareness and research.

With such a large event looming on the horizon, the team began practice on Oct. 31, and according to Thomas, Bryson has been pushing his players to com-

pete at an elite level not seen since the 1990s.

"We run a very fast offense, and we hope to make basketball simple," Bryson said. "When people see our style of play, they'll understand why our players have been so conditioned."

For Bryson, basketball is a family affair. His son, Ben Bryson, is a freshman and hopes to play on the varsity team this winter. His wife and fellow West alumni April Bryson, a 1993 graduate, is also known in the community for her athletic success in both basketball and volleyball.

April Bryson turned down the chance to play basketball for Coach Pat Summitt at the University of Tennessee so she could pursue her passion for volleyball at Appalachian State. She works on the faculty with her husband as the school's personal finance teacher.

"West Henderson is home to me," April Bryson said. "Everything at West is very familiar and the people have been so welcoming."

Although he's the one of the most decorated basketball players in WNC history, students and fans won't find a single medal, plaque or trophy around his office.

Instead they will see photos and articles involving his favorite memories as a coach, player, husband and father.

"This season will be a success to me if the boys on the team have fun," Bryson said. "My goal is to rebuild the community of West Henderson basketball."