

Yerkovich retires after a 'great ride' at Judge

By James Edward

The Deseret News (published 03/02/2010)

After 44 years, 634 wins, three state championships, six runner-up finishes and publishing a very "personal and meaningful" book, Judge Memorial basketball coach **Jim Yerkovich** is ready to retire.

He simply said, it's time.

"My energy is not what it was before, and I think the kids deserve and the job demands full-force energy going forward," said Yerkovich, 67. "It's been a great ride. It's the people that have made the difference. I know that might sound trite, but it's not. It's all about people."

Open-heart surgery, nerve damage in his right hand as a result of the surgery and two knee replacements, have effectively slowed him down physically. Mentally, he's fine. He understands the game he loves as well as ever.

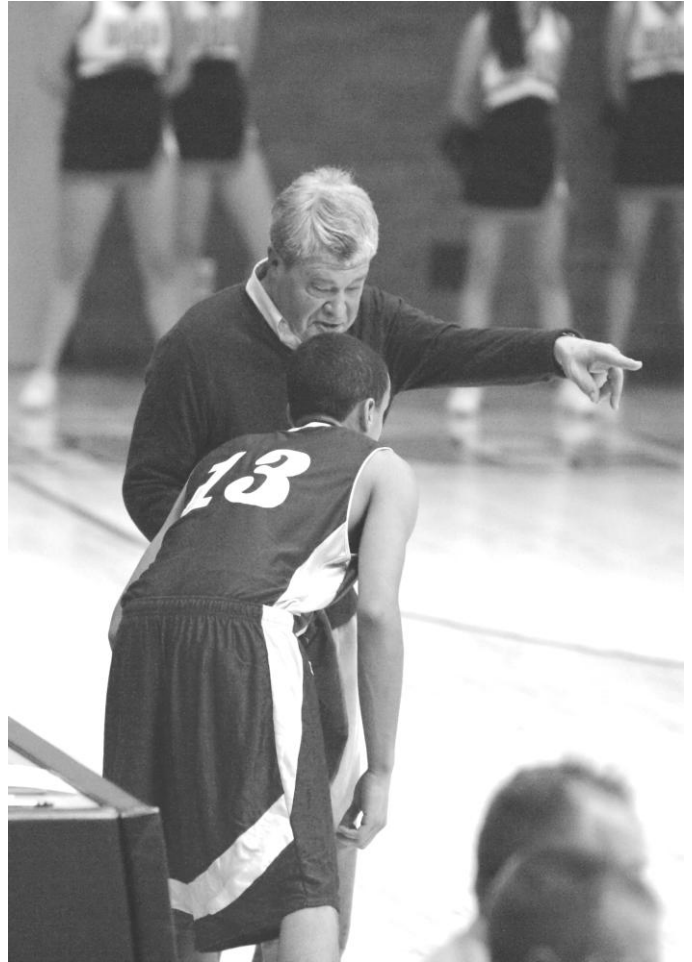
Yerkovich made his retirement decision official when he informed his players after school on Tuesday, but he's not done coaching them just yet.

Even though Yerkovich paced the sideline in Judge's gym for the last time, his retirement wasn't official until after Judge's team traveled to Cumberland, Md., to participate in the 50th anniversary of the Alhambra National Catholic Invitational Tournament. It was Judge's 13th tourney trip, and Yerkovich can't wait. He knows his team won't be able to compete with some of the elite Catholic teams in the country, but that's just fine with him.

Winning was never what it was all about. That's what he told his team after last Saturday's 3A state championship loss to Wasatch.

"When the smoke clears, they will realize there was a lot more to this experience than the final score of the state championship game," Yerkovich said.

Judge Memorial announced Yerkovich's replacement as longtime assistant **Dan Del Porto**.



Coach Yerkovich gives instructions to Michael Olive.

Yerkovich said Del Porto will carry on the "WE" philosophy the program has adhered to for the past 30 years.

In 2003, Yerkovich penned that philosophy in a book, "WE: a Model for Coaching and Christian Living." He calls it the highlight of his coaching career.

Yerkovich summed up the core of the "WE" philosophy in his book by saying, "coaches can teach players how to play a game at the same time they teach them about life."

That philosophy pervaded his program for 30 years, and in conjunction with some fiercely loyal assistant coaches, they were the primary

Continued on next page

JUDGE MEMORIAL BASKETBALL: Yerkovich's legacy



Jim Yerkovich

- * - Age 67
- * - Career Judge Memorial boys basketball head coach, 1966-2010
- 634 wins
- * - 3 state championships (1980, 2006, 2008)
- * - 6 runner-up finishes (1970, 1973, 1985, 1989, 2003, 2010)
- * - 16 region championships
- * - Sent 50 players on to Division I college basketball
- * - Grew up in Rock Springs, Wyo., attended Judge beginning his sophomore year; graduated from Judge in 1961; graduated from the University of San Francisco in 1965.
- * - Authored "WE: A Model for Coaching and Christian Living" in 2003

Continued from previous page

reasons Yerkovich loved coaching high school basketball for 44 years.

"He values the six runner-ups as much as he values the three state championships," said Del Porto. "If it was just about winning, there's no way he would've lasted 44 years."

Del Porto graduated from Judge in 1985, and has served as an assistant coach to Yerkovich in some capacity ever since.

"In all the years I've been with him, I've never heard him once belittle or give a kid something other than constructive criticism. He always looks for the positive in a kid's game and accentuates the positives. I think that's why he gets the most out of players," said Del Porto. "He's trying to use basketball as a tool to make you a better person. He makes the kids feel good about themselves."

One of Judge's best teams was the 1985 team that lost to Provo in the state championship game at BYU's Marriott Center. **Craig Drury** was a young coach at Provo at the time, and now that Yerkovich is stepping down, Drury becomes the most tenured coach in the state at 27 years.

When Drury heard of Yerkovich's retirement, he simply said, "Good for him."

"He's a gentleman. Through the years he's been a really good example to high school coaches about how to treat kids, how to work a sideline," Drury said.

Yerkovich is retiring with a ridiculously impressive resume.

His teams won 16 region championships, qualified for the state tournament 38 times and won state championships in 1980, 2006 and 2008.

In 2006, he became the first high school coach to be honored as Utah Sports Professional of the Year at the Utah Chapter MS Dinner of Champions. The following year, he was named U.S. Western Sectional Coach of the Year.

One of his biggest honors came in 1981, when he coached the West team in the McDonald's All-American game at Wichita, Kan. The West, however, lost 96-95 when a high school senior named **Michael Jordan** scored the winning basket on a reverse dunk at the buzzer.

The 1961 graduate of Judge Memorial didn't sweat the loss, saying you win some and you lose some.

With his coaching, his time as an assistant vice principal, not to mention 25 years as an AP calculus teacher, Yerkovich is proud of the far-reaching impact he's had at Judge Memorial.

"By staying in this place and having a reasonable program, we've built a community," he said. "If you were to ask me if I would do it again, I would definitely do it and I'd do it the same way."

As for retirement, he's excited to spend more time with his wife of 19 years, **Betty**, along with his three children and three stepchildren — all of whom have graduated from college.