

By Bob Tompkins

Alexandria Town Talk

It's a wonder she didn't have a nickname like "Spitfire" or "Bricks."

Carrice Baker, tough as nails and ever ready to answer a challenge, is going into the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame June 27 in Natchitoches for her accomplishments over 39 years as a high school girls basketball coach at both Winnsboro and Jena. She won more than 1,000 games and guided her teams to eight state championships - four at each school - without being a genius scribbling X's and O's. She did it with talented players, but with strict adherence to discipline and fundamentals.

Her approach to coaching: hold the blinis and caviar, and pass the bread and butter.

Brenda McGuffee Loe, who played on three state championship teams at Jena High School under Baker (1973, '74, '75) and went on to play for LSU, returned to Jena after college to be Baker's assistant coach.

"Having played for LSU, I had a couple of ideas about what we could do," said Loe, a 29-year veteran high school coach at Denham Springs. "I said, 'Let's put this in and let's put that in,' and she said, 'We've got to learn to dribble first.' For her, it was always fundamentals and the basics.

"She was a no-frills coach, very much a disciplinarian," said Loe, noting Baker cut out the fancy pre-game drills that were part of the Jena tradition under Louisiana Sports Hall of Famer Jelly Pigott.

Baker's coaching career is synonymous with words like "fundamentals" and "repetition" and "discipline." Inevitably, another word will come up in remembrances about coach Baker - "towel."

Former UNLV men's basketball coach Jerry Tarkanian may have been known for chewing on a towel during games, but Baker always held a towel in her lap on the sidelines.

"She'd put it at the end of her skirt," said longtime Natchitoches Central girls basketball coach Emma Boozman, whose career win total (soaring over 700) owes a lot to the days she played for Baker at Winnsboro High School in the late 1960s and early '70s. "Sometimes, when she was upset, she'd pick up that towel and pop whoever was sitting beside her."

"It was my way of showing my frustration," said Baker. "I think they retired my towel at Winnsboro when I left."

If that towel was retired, she continued the tradition with another at Jena.

"She'd say, 'McGuffee, come sit by me. Nobody wants to sit next to me,' " Loe said. "She'd pop the fire out of us."

Jennifer Loe, Brenda's sister-in-law who played for Baker in two of her early years at Jena, said several players then had an affectionate nickname for the Lady Giants coach.

"They called her 'Woman,' " said Jennifer Loe. "It came from (the Helen Reddy song's lyric) 'I am woman, hear me roar.'"

Baker did her share of roaring, but "she cared about making each individual play to their potential," said Jennifer Loe. "She didn't let anybody slide, whether they were a benchwarmer or a starter."

Demanding maximum effort by each of her players, Baker won state titles at Winnsboro in 1954, '55, '58 and '60 in the era of 6-player (3 on each end of the court) girls basketball. At Jena, following by a few years the legacy of Pigott, the iconic Jena girls head coach and 2008 Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame inductee, Baker won state titles in 1973, '74, '75 and '79.

Her documented won-loss record is 972-191 (.836), but records for three of her seasons in the late 1940s are unavailable, one of which is believed to have been a 22-win season.

Baker started coaching at Winnsboro in 1947 as a 19-year-old graduate from Louisiana Tech, and six years later, her 1952-53 team ended the national record 218-game win streak owned by Baskin High, coached by Louisiana Sports Hall of Famer Edna Tarbutton, before a home crowd in Winnsboro.

"When I started at Winnsboro, they beat the fire out of us every year, but I finally got some pretty good athletes, and we'd come closer every time. The gym was full and there were people outside," recalled Baker of a gym that held 300 people at most. "We had a good following by then."

Characteristic of her stoic attitude about wins and losses, Baker said, "That was just another ball game."

If preparation was a hallmark of her coaching career, so was adjustment.

"In my four years under her," said Boozman, "she went from coaching 3-on-3 to two rovers, to 5-on-5 when I was a senior (1971-72). I'm sure that was a big adjustment for her."

"I'd get the boys' coaches to help me," Baker said of her learning the game through each change. "I wasn't scared to ask people for advice. The men coaches were real accommodating."

Baker's youngest sister, Alice Sparks of Alexandria, said she played at Jena against Winnsboro teams coached by her sister.

"That was a little different," Sparks said, "but I always looked up to her and admired her for everything she did. If she had in her mind to do something, she did it. She played tennis. She taught swimming. She could just pick up a game and play it."

After her older, married sister died at a young age, Carrice eventually married her sister's widower, Morgan Baker.

"It was probably two or three years later (after her sister's death), and I relented and married him," recalled the 82-year-old Baker. "He had four boys and one of 'em was still pretty young. I became an aunt and a stepmother to them. Now I'm a great aunt and 'grandmother' to their kids. I tell Morgan, 'I think you're the only man alive who could put up with me.' "

When Baker returned to her high school alma mater, Jena, in 1972-73, it was not only to coach.

"She came back to Jena to take care of her mom and dad," said Brenda Loe.

She cared for her players, too, despite her deserved reputation as a taskmaster.

"I'd go out of my way to help 'em and show interest in them," she said, "not only in basketball but in other activities at school."

Coaching was the axis around which her world turned.

"I told somebody once it was probably a sin I loved (coaching) so much," she said. "I gave it everything I had from the time I started to the time I retired. I devoted my whole life to it.

"I don't know how I won so many games," she said. "I guess I was lucky or something."