

# Opinion by Greg Hansen : Rincon hoops coach 'as old-school as you can get'

Opinion by Greg Hansen

Tucson, Arizona | Published: 01.13.2009



When told that he has won more games, 305, than all but two active high school basketball coaches in Tucson, Rich Utter doesn't say a thing. He shrugs.

This is not a line of questioning he prefers.

You try again. You ask about his first year in coaching, at tiny Valley Union High School near the Mexico border.

"We won two games," he says. "It was a tough go."

It is also a slow go. Unless you count JV games, or middle school games played outside on cement courts, Utter was stuck on those two coaching victories for another decade.

This much is obvious: The man whose team, the Rincon/University Rangers, is 15-3 and No. 2 in the Class 5A-II rankings, did not get into coaching for the glamour.

Utter arrives at school at 6:50a.m. each day. He teaches five math classes. At 2:45 p.m., he morphs into a basketball coach. Some nights he doesn't get home until 8:30.

Nobody does that any more.

"Rich even teaches zero hour, before the regular start of school," says former Rincon basketball coach Roland LaVetter, who hired Utter to be his JV coach 28 years ago. "In this age of the high school rent-a-coach, Rich is as old-school as you can get. If you can get a guy like him, you are fortunate."

Rich Utter is the oldest of Richard Utter's five children from Otsego, N.Y., a small (pop: 3,904) burg down the road from the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. The family subsisted on the father's wages from the nearby Elmer's glue factory and his general ability as a fix-it guy.

Rich didn't want to be a fix-it guy or work at the glue factory, so he became a four-sport high school star who went away to school (Slippery Rock University, 400 miles south in Pennsylvania) with the intent on being a physical education teacher.

Coaching? It wasn't part of a grand career plan.

And now, in his 21st season as Rincon's head basketball coach, 305-230, the dean of Tucson's boys basketball coaches is an overnight sensation. Only Ironwood Ridge's Brian Peabody (355) and Santa Rita's Jim Ferguson (312) have more career wins among active coaches in Tucson.

There's a good backstory with Utter, and it starts with LaVetter, who created bold headlines when he coached Pueblo to back-to-back state championships in 1977-78, resigned, sat out a year and then became the head coach at Rincon. He was big news.

The Rangers were probably the top basketball school in Tucson at the time; under Dick King and Bill Mehle, Rincon won the '65 state title and reached the championship game in 1967, 1975, 1976 and 1978. Given that context, you might imagine that the scramble to be part of LaVetter's new coaching staff was intense.

"I know how tough it is to get your foot in the door," LaVetter remembers. "When I applied to coach a freshman team at Pueblo in 1967, there were 50 applicants. So I put a lot of thought into it." Among those who sent an application to LaVetter was Utter, whose line of employment was getting up at 4 a.m. to drive one of those

mobile lunch trucks that stops at Tucson construction sites.

"I sensed a real maturity about Rich," LaVetter recalls. "He was on a mission to be successful. I don't think he was intimidated by much." Here's how intimidated Rich Utter was: After graduating from Slippery Rock he dispatched grad school applications to Texas, Oklahoma, Kentucky, North Carolina and Arizona.

Not a Valparaiso or Gonzaga in the group.

LaVetter hired Utter, who worked eight years as a junior varsity coach and spent time teaching and coaching at middle schools and with a regional summer traveling team.

Across 20 seasons, the scores of players to show up at Utter's door have included just two Division I scholarship-caliber athletes: Devon Eason and David Jackson.

You'll find the same ratio at most Southern Arizona high schools. "I think that's the way high school basketball should be," Utter says. "Some years you're blessed with talented players. Some years it's more of a struggle. I don't like the concept of one school being on top all the time. It's not about winning. It's about working together." Utter's 1994-95 squad might have been his best team, 23-4, but it played awkwardly in the state tournament and was eliminated prematurely. In 2005-06, Rincon, 23-8, lost in the state 4A-I finals. Now he's back with another winner, a size-challenged but chemistry-laden squad trying to establish momentum for next week's anticipated showdown with No. 1 Ironwood Ridge.

"People ask me how long I'm going to do this, and I don't have an answer," Utter says. "It's still fun. I like what I do. What more is there?"