

'I don't think the man sleeps': Lackawanna's Marcus Rivers coaches both girls and boys basketball teams

Clevis Murray, Buffalo News



Coming off a loss in the Section VI Class B1 final, the Lackawanna boys basketball team regrouped in the offseason with coach Marcus Rivers. The team held workouts during the summer to improve their skills with the goal of winning the program's first sectional title since 2011.

As the boys were putting in the work, members of the girls basketball team took notice. They saw the commitment from Rivers and his players to try to get over the hump of consecutive sectional finals defeats and wanted a coach like that to push them.

Members of the girls team began to train with Rivers and the boys, leading to a bond with Rivers and didn't want his mentoring to stop once the school year began.

As they saw something in him, he also saw something in them.

"While I was coaching the boys, I always looked at the girls thinking that they were very talented, and if they had the right coach or someone they could believe in, they could be pretty good," Rivers said.

Left to right, assistant coach Rodrick Richardson, guard Miriah Mashtare (12), and head coach Marcus Rivers show disappointment after a Maryvale player makes a basket in the first quarter of a game at Maryvale High School in Cheektowaga on Jan. 23, 2023.

Joseph Cooke / Buffalo News

Seeing the bond forming, Lackawanna Athletic Director Amy D'Amato met with Rivers to probe his interest in coaching the girls program, along with the boys. At first, Rivers declined the offer but changed his mind once the interest from the girls players became apparent.

"If they want me to be their coach, then I'll be their coach," Rivers said. "That's what it came down to, is them wanting me to be their coach."

Rivers, 33, is in the unique situation of coaching the Lackawanna boys and girls teams simultaneously. The teams have not had games on the same days thus far, and Rivers

keeps the same energy as in the summer by sometimes having the teams practice together.

“It’s been pretty good practicing with the girls,” Lackawanna senior guard Julienn Clements said. “We’ve just been working together. We help each other out and try to motivate each other to get better every day.”

The Lackawanna boys are 7-6 after Friday night's 70-54 victory against East Aurora with three weeks left in the regular season.

The girls are 4-8 and a victory shy of their most wins in a season since the 2009-10 season, in which the Steelers won 12 games. Rivers saw potential in the roster and gave the players hope. He helped them believe in themselves and discover who they can become as players.

“I think we’ve improved drastically from last year,” junior guard Diarah Dilbert said. “He’s always helping us get better so we can compete with great teams. We’re a lot more disciplined and our skills have improved.”

Chance to learn

Rivers also coaches during the football and outdoor track and field seasons, and wants the generations he comes across to have a chance at accomplishing what he did.

Born and raised in Lackawanna, Rivers was a standout on the Steelers football team and parlayed that into a career as a wide receiver at the University at Buffalo and multiple NFL auditions. He also was a high school basketball star, having been named to the All-Western New York first team in 2006-07.

He signed with the Green Bay Packers in 2012 and the Baltimore Ravens the following year. He was released by each time before the season, but the experience taught him just how difficult it is to make it in the NFL, regardless of how hard one works.

“When I was with the Baltimore Ravens, I went into camp and was studying my butt off and I was working hard,” Rivers said. “Any time people ask me about the NFL, I always say, ‘Watch ‘Hard Knocks’ and know if you’re not a superstar, times that by three.’ I was leaving the stadium at midnight and getting back at 5 a.m., and I was just trying to make the roster. You’re basically a nobody and have to study and do extra stuff to just make the league.”

In between NFL stints, Rivers pursued opportunities in the Arena Football League and Canadian Football League, but he experienced the same fate as he did in the NFL, being cut before the season.

As time passed and the football calls stopped, Rivers had to figure out what was going to be next for him in – a tall task for anyone whose goals have to be altered by things out of his control. Although he never got to play an actual NFL game, Rivers was able to experience a competitive NFL environment.

“At the end of the day, it is what is,” Rivers said. “What else could I do besides play sports? If it’s not my calling, then I’ll give back all of the knowledge I learned in college and the pros to young men and see if they’d be receptive to it.”

Next step

In late 2016, Rivers came to grips that pursuing a football career was over, and received inspiration on a new career path while speaking to his sister, Sharranoda.

“Why don’t you take the civil service exam?” Sharranoda asked.

He took her advice and passed the exam in October 2016, and began to realize his post-football career would lead him to help the community he once starred in.

“Football was going south, and my sister suggested I take the civil service exam,” Marcus said. “In my head, I was like, ‘Why not become a police officer?’ At the time, there was only one Black police officer, and I would’ve been the second.”

On Aug. 2, 2017, Rivers' birthday, he was sworn in as a police officer. Almost six years later, Rivers is still an officer, while maintaining his availability throughout the school year to coach multiple sports. Rivers works overnights from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. so he can coach in the afternoon.

"If I did the day shift, which is 7:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., I wouldn't be able to coach," he said. "It works out beautifully because I don't have to stress that much. I'm from the community so me being a police officer is kind of easy because I know a lot of people. It kind of helps because you get some kind of sponsorship and sometimes you get people that help out with the kids so it's like the community policing itself."

Rivers' goal is to use sports and his presence to try to let the students know there can be life after Lackawanna if they decide to pursue it. He said athletics is symbolic of life because work has to be put in for one to become the best, and there's always adversity, and somehow somehow you have to find a way to overcome it. According to [census.gov](https://www.census.gov), only 19% of residents from Lackawanna over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher.

"I take pride in everything I do," Rivers said. "I've always had that competitive nature of always wanting to be the best. When I had an opportunity to coach, I told myself, 'If I can get one kid to go to college, I feel like I've done my job.' At Lackawanna, we have so much talent, but talent goes nowhere, it seems like it stops at high school and nowhere after that."

Knowing his community can be better is why Rivers isn't only speaking about what his players can do, but also taking action.

D'Amato said Rivers has used his coaching stipend to purchase uniforms for the boys to have a different choice on gameday, along with buying warmups for the boys and girls. On gamedays, Rivers brings a uniform set for the teams to wear, and after the game, players put what they wore in a bin for the coach to bring home and wash.

“He tries to balance his home life, work life, and life here at school,” D’Amato said. “He sees our Lackawanna kids as family. He works his shift and is either calling or texting me to prep for practices before school is out.

"I don't think the man sleeps. He coaches because he loves each team. He doesn't think twice about making each and every moment great for our kids. He's completely selfless."

Nobody asked Rivers to do any of that. He wants the players to have a positive high school experience because that's where most of them will peak athletically, as only 3.5% of boys high school basketball players and 4.1% of girls high school basketball participants play the sport collegiately, regardless of level, according to the NCAA.

Having gone from the face of his community to a pillar of it, Rivers said making his players feel good about themselves has become his calling.

“I wanted to give them a look so they could be proud,” River said. “Sometimes some of these memories is all they have.

"If they're going to go through high school, I want them to do it with a bang so they can have memories that last forever. I try to do my best even when it comes to buying sneakers or socks. Anything that I can help with because I'll do because I'm blessed and I'll give. I'm just trying to teach them that when you're blessed you have to give your blessings on to others."