

# 'He's in it for the kids': Monticello basketball coach Christopher Russo wins state honor

Melissa Kramer

Times Herald-Record

[View Comments](#)



It only took five minutes for former Monticello boys basketball coach Dick O'Neill to hire Christopher Russo during his interview with the school.

Russo was hired on the spot. And in the years since, his energy and willingness to succeed has rubbed off on the Monticello basketball community.

Monday was a great day to be a Panther.

The current Monticello boys basketball head coach was named as the 2020-21 New York Boys Basketball Coach of the Year by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).

“I was pleasantly surprised, I guess,” Russo said. “It’s quite an honor and something I share with so many people. What I keep telling everyone as they congratulate me is it’s not possible to be able to do this without the support of my family, without some tremendous assistant coaches, junior varsity coaches, modified coaches and obviously our players, too. It’s a true commitment by everybody, so it’s a shared award that I’m humbled and honored to have received.”

But it wasn't a surprise to former and current players. Josh Gatling, Monticello's only 1,000-point scorer and a 2019-20 graduate, has a close relationship with Russo on and off the court. He even swings by the program to lend his knowledge of the game to the current players when he can.

“It was an honor playing for coach Russo,” Gatling said. “If I can put my high school jersey back on just one more time, it would be with my man, coach Russo. I miss that man, I miss playing for him.”



Russo has been in Monticello since 2002 and was a junior varsity assistant coach under O'Neill until he retired. He's been the varsity coach for the last 14 years.

"He's in it for the kids," O'Neill said. "He wants to win ballgames, but he has great concern for his players. I think they know and respect that. He was just willing to go the extra mile, whatever it took in whatever area to get it done. The big thing when you're coaching kids is the first thing they have to understand is that you care. If they know that you care, now you got them and now you can do something with them. It's very obvious right from the time you meet Chris that he really cares."

Russo was nominated for the honor by former Roscoe athletic director Fred Ahart and current Monticello Central School District Director of Athletics, Kurt Buddenhagen.

When asked about the late Ahart, Russo became emotional. Ahart was the athletic director at Roscoe and also a coach for 50 years. Russo's first full-time teaching job was in Roscoe and Ahart hired him to help coach football. Russo was also the girls basketball junior varsity coach and Ahart's wife, Becky, was the head coach.

Russo said he learned a "tremendous amount" from the Aharts.

"Fred was a great friend of mine and a mentor of mine," Russo said. "To be nominated by Fred was very special. Kurt has been so supportive of our program and of me since he's been here the last few years. It was very special to be nominated by those two individuals."

Russo has accumulated 116 wins in 13 seasons coaching basketball. According to the organization, the award recognizes those who are leading their sport, shaping their athletes, and contributing in a positive way to their community.

"I appreciate him more than he knows," Gattling said. "He's definitely more than just a coach. He does more than just being a coach."

Senior guard Pedro Rodriguez and senior forward Michael Mingot said they were proud of their coach.



**Boys basketball: Meet the 2021-22 Times-Herald Record/Varsity 845 Super 7**

In practice, Russo has a "chain system" where his players can get awarded accolades such as top hustler and top teammate.

"I feel like those things actually help us work harder because we actually have something to work for in practice," Rodriguez said. "It's a lot of competition between my teammates, so it makes us work extra hard to try and win those chains and try to be the top hustler or top teammate of the week."

And he remembers the little things as well and knows how to bring teams together, the players said.

“He records everything you do, no matter whether it’s something small or something big,” Mingot said. “He remembers everything and he cares for his kids and his team.”

On the court, he always has his players' backs and is humble.

“I’m glad he came my way and I’m glad he was part of my life,” O’Neill said.

*MKramer1@th-record.com*

*Twitter: @MKramerTHR*