

Long before his days at Northwest, former BVNW basketball player and 2014 graduate Clayton Custer made a monumental decision. Up until the third grade, Custer and fellow 2014 graduate David Salach played against BVNW head basketball coach Ed Fritz's second grade team.

Fritz's team, which included 2014 graduates Ben Richardson, Kyle Harrison and Fritz's son, Vince, beat Custer and Salach's team countless times. Despite the fact Custer was only in second grade at the time, and on one of the top two teams in the area, he said he quickly grew tired of losing to Fritz's team.

"I don't know if it's the most honorable thing to do," Custer said laughing. "But I decided I wanted to be on their team, so I switched."

Eventually the team grew together, playing in tournaments across the country before coming to Northwest.

"It was just kind of a fun group to coach and to work with and spend a lot of time [with]," Fritz said. "We traveled all over the country playing, we won a tournament in Las Vegas, played in Indiana, [and] played all over the United States."

Although Custer, Vince and the rest of the group graduated, Fritz can still be found spending his time coaching youth and high school basketball teams. Fritz currently coaches a sixth and seventh grade youth basketball team, along with the varsity team at BVNW.

Vince said his dad's approach to coaching did not change much from youth basketball to the high school level.

"To be honest I don't think he coached [us when we were younger] that much differently," Vince said. "Always from a young age he held us to a very high standard. Obviously it wasn't as thorough and as hard as he was in high school."

Whether it be coaching at the youth or high school level, Fritz said being able to share a wealth of knowledge with his son brought him a joy that he continues to have to this day.

"Everybody that has expertise always wants to share it with their kids, no matter what it is," Fritz said. "So being able to do that and have fun together and do something we love is always worth it."

Custer said playing with Fritz from a young age taught the group a strong sense of how to play the game the right way.

"He taught us all how to play basketball the right way," Custer said. "He taught us how to move the ball. We all played defense like he taught us how to play defense. We really shared the ball and that's why we were good, that's why we had a good team when we were growing up because we were more fundamentally sound than most of the other teams."

With the amount of time spent together over the years, Custer said at some points their group frustrated Fritz.

"I know he probably got frustrated with all of us at times just because we had played for him for so long, and we kind of already knew what he was going to say before he said it," Custer said. "I don't know if we reacted the way he wanted us to react to some of the stuff he said, just because we knew him for so long, but we respected coach Fritz so much."

Fritz said coaching the younger teams is different because of the change in skillsets at the lower levels. Because of the gap in talent, Fritz said teaching the basics of the sport is more important.

"The youth kids are not quite as skilled or advanced so you have to do a lot more fundamentals and a little bit of repetition with the youth kids," Fritz said. "You kind of break it down a little more."

Vince said his dad's persistence for excellence is part of what makes him a great coach.

“He works harder than anyone I know and goes in with the mindset that he’s gonna outwork his opponents,” Vince said.

Even with the success Fritz has earned over the years, Custer said his work ethic remains the same.

“He’s not stuck in [his ways],” Custer said. “I think he’s good at kind of changing the way he does things to best fit the team that he’s coaching at that time.”

Fritz said being able to try things out at the youth level gives him the opportunity to experiment and see what new methods work.

“The neat stuff is with my youth teams I’ve tried things out that I maybe wouldn’t try out with the high school,” Fritz said. “A new offense or a new wrinkle, and a lot of times I end up using them in high school.”

Custer said no matter which team he was coaching, Fritz was able to bring them all together as a group.

“Playing for coach Fritz was the time of my life and he was a huge part of that,” Custer said. “He brought all of us together, we were best friends, and he was always our coach. When I think about ‘my coach’ I think about coach Fritz.”

Vince said the process of playing with his dad repared him extremely well for his time playing basketball at Missouri Southern State University now.

“He definitely prepared us, the intensity at Northwest and what he demanded from us was similar to a college-level,” Vince said. “The understanding he gave me of basketball definitely prepared me probably better than what most high school programs could ever prepare you for college basketball.”

One of the things Custer said remained consistent through the years was Fritz’s expectations for his teams.

“I think the biggest thing was just that he never sugar-coated stuff,” Custer said. “He was tough on us, and he knew that playing basketball at the next level was going to be tough too so he did a good job of getting us all ready to play.”

When coaching at the youth or high school level, Fritz said learning how to get the best out of each kid continues to challenge him.

“Every kid is different,” Fritz said. “You have got to find out what it is that makes those guys receptive to learn and be coached.”

Story by: Gabe Swartz