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ALERT

TOP STORY

NAU's Burcar enjoys time managing Little League

NATHAN ECKER Special to the Daily Sun
Dec 27, 2023



Shane Burcar manages during his West Flagstaff Little League team during a game on June 6, 2022.
Wes Salonen, Arizona Daily Sun

In the dugout instead of on the sideline, Northern Arizona men's basketball coach Shane Burcar spent his summer with West Flagstaff Little League managing his sons' team. He is not new to this, as he led the WFL All-Star team to the state quarterfinals in 2022 and 2023, as well as the round of 12 in 2021.

The highlight of his managing career came in June, when the WFL All-Stars faced the Continental Little League All-Stars at Dawson Field in the opening round of the District 1 playoffs over the summer. Parking was difficult to come by, as parents, fans and much of the Northern Arizona men's basketball team surrounded the diamond for the rivalry contest.

If the LED lights from Continental Park's multiple fields did not keep nearby Flagstaff citizens awake, the crowd noise was sure to.

WFL came out on top, 8-2, with the help of a dominant pitching performance from Brisson Burcar, Shane's son. In the aftermath, a teary-eyed and proud Shane praised his team for the commanding victory, all while his Northern Arizona team took the field to celebrate with the victors and live out their own baseball dreams on the field that was clearly not built for 6-foot-5 basketball players.

Lumberjacks forward Carson Towt was in attendance, appreciating the beauty of the moment, observing the sunset fall behind the San Francisco Peaks and his coach take on another role as mentor.

"We got our sunflower seeds in, we're against the cages cheering them on." Towt said. "It was awesome to see that. It's good to see how he coaches them, the same way he coaches us. He holds them to just as high a standard as us, if not more 'cause it's his own son. You can see his passion and love for coaching and really just making an impact on young people's lives."

The moment meant just as much to the kids as it did to the manager who got them there. The man who had led his basketball team to an unlikely Big Sky Conference tournament championship game months before was now embracing all of his athletes with a joy unmatched by previous moments of success.

An introduction to baseball

Burcar was asked by his high school coach what he wanted to be when he grew up, to which he responded he wanted to be a Division I basketball coach. He did not know how he would accomplish this, but it was what he yearned for.

Rather than dissuade Burcar at a time when career aspirations seemed like pipe dreams, his coach supported him and affirmed he would become the coach he envisioned. It was a key moment in young Burcar's life, spearheading a set of ideals that the now D-I coach of four years would pass on to his own players.

However, that was not the beginning of Burcar's story. Before a 12-year career as a high school basketball coach at Mesa High School and a promotion to head coach at Northern Arizona University in 2020 after becoming interim coach in 2019, the Hancock, Michigan, native began his life enthralled with the game of baseball.

Baseball was his favorite growing up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He was just a short drive away from the southern coast of Lake Superior but lived on the opposite side of the state from his beloved Detroit Tigers. Growing up he would sit in his bedroom at night with a radio to his ear, serenaded by the magical baritones of broadcaster Ernie Harwell.

Burcar idolized former Tigers outfielder Kirk Gibson and pitcher Jack Morris for their intensity and commitment to the game.

He was a good younger player, too, if you ask him. Burcar, who is not one to grandstand, admitted that he had a good arm as a kid. Pitcher and shortstop were his positions. He showed enough skill to warrant letters from the Cincinnati Reds and an offer from the University of Louisville in Kentucky.

Baseball was Burcar's first love, but he did not receive interest from the one team that would have made his dreams come true.

"My dream was to pitch for the Detroit Tigers, but they didn't call so I got into coaching," he said.

Burcar got his first coaching job in high school with his best friend. The pair coached a Little League team in their hometown and won the league. From then on he knew that coaching was where he belonged.

His coaching knowledge originated from reading about the likes of Herb Brooks -- the coach of the 1980 gold medalist U.S. hockey team -- and legendary Green Bay Packers football coach Vince Lombardi. His closest mentors were his own coaches, though. They were tough but positive, teaching him about relationships with players.

The lessons Burcar learned in his youth are ingrained within his coaching philosophy in an extensive career -- which includes a reunion with baseball.

Little League leader

Burcar wanted to coach his own children when they began youth sports. It began with his oldest daughter, Bella, who helped lead the Flagstaff High School girls basketball team to a state title as a freshman last season, and continued with the arrival of three more children.

Being with his kids was not the only reason Burcar sought other coaching opportunities. Involvement in the community and a passion for providing meaningful experiences to kids through sports provides constant motivation.

“Playing sports, that’s my whole motive,” he said. “Just be a part of sports. Sports are so healthy. You learn success, you learn failure, you learn how to deal with yourself.”

Burcar began managing Little League in Mesa, but took a larger step when his family made the transition to Flagstaff. At the time, his oldest son, Brisson, was entering the Majors with West Flagstaff Little League, with his youngest child not far behind.

The lifelong coach in many sports quickly became an important part of the league, volunteering his time on the league's board as well as coaching the WFL Snakes and eventual Majors All-Star team in consecutive years. It has become an opportunity for Burcar to reinforce the dreams of local youth, just as his own youth coaches did many years ago.

"I had great support and hopefully these kids that I'm coaching know they have someone in their corner and give them that belief," he said.

Someone who shares that belief, WFL President Chris DeRosa has seen Burcar as an integral part of the league and community in recent years. His time spent pulling double-duties has impacted everyone in the organization. He helps coaches coach, showing them how to run a structured practice that is capable of holding the attention of 9- to 12-year-olds. That's an important task if players are to stay committed to any athletic conquest.

It's also important to build connections throughout the community.

"Without Shane, I'm not sure we grow as much as I would like to see our growth," DeRosa said. "Without him we don't have the community ties and we don't have the community support that we would when he is involved versus if he would not be."

Julie Burcar, Shane's wife, believes her husband's presence is beneficial to the league because he wants the same experience for every kid he coaches that he had growing up in Hancock.

"He just has such a heart and desire for kids to have a good experience and good upbringing and a good support group," Julie said. "He wants people to be successful. He wants people to be happy. He tries to be helpful."

Lessons learned from young minds

What Burcar gives to the community, he feels has been given back through the opportunity to coach a future generation of athletes. The knowledge gained from pre-teens can be salient if you allow it, a lesson that Burcar learned from his own kids. Players at any level want to be cared for and know they have value to the team, meaning that connections between player and coach need to be nurtured. Bridging that gap also includes understanding the happy balance between life on and off the field.

Coaching at all levels has taught Burcar to be more connected with his players -- a consummate lesson that has been taught since the first time he swung a bat and dribbled a basketball.

He wants to be able to see the difference he has made, but asks for no reimbursement other than the self-improvement of his players as people away from sports.

“Hopefully they’re playing baseball next year and as we grow up I’m spitting seeds and watching them play high school baseball and enjoying the heck out of high school, that’s the big picture of it all,” he said. “These guys are going to be 20, 30 years old, and hopefully I’ve paid forward what I got as a kid.”

But he’s also teaching the kids to play hard.

“He brings that competitive edge to the league where kids rise to the occasion in competitiveness,” WFL manager Gary Kirkman said. “He pulls more out of them than they even know that they had. I’ve seen it where kids walk away and they’re like, ‘I didn’t know I could do that.’”

Those close to Burcar admitted that he can be intense -- Julie thought she was competitive until she met Shane -- but his care for the kids, community and game of baseball makes every moment worthwhile.

“He’s one you always like to coach against because he brings it and he’s respectful, but you know it’s going to be a very good, competitive game,” Kirkman said.

Continuing to compete

An improbable run in the Big Sky Conference basketball tournament in Boise, Idaho, was enough to bring Burcar to tears when reminiscing about the moment. The Lumberjacks head coach found himself on one of the biggest stages of his career, just a game away from the NCAA Tournament.

Though his team fell short, the moment was the pinnacle of a dream that began in high school.



Northern Arizona Lumberjacks coach Shane Burcar (middle) leads the men's basketball team during a recent game.

NAU Athletics, courtesy

The summer saw Burcar switch gears, leading his Little League team to a second consecutive state quarterfinal. Once again, a championship, was elusive.

His competitive nature will not allow him to settle for minimal success. Finishing the job is the goal, but his happiness will not be determined by his team's accomplishments.

Teaching and getting the best out of his athletes come before any thought of championship aspirations.

Memories of the year's tournaments will live on forever through the stories of kids and coaches. Though more important to Burcar are the relationships that he has built with young athletes through his time in Flagstaff.

The hope for Burcar is that those same athletes in the future will embrace their former coach and remember him just as he did his own mentors.

"Coaching relationships are forever," he said.

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