



JOLIE GREEN • HAYS DAILY NEWS
Keith Riley, head coach of the track and field team at Hill City High School, watches as students sprint past him during practice Friday in Hill City.

Honor for coach Riley

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HILL CITY — Last August, longtime Hill City High School boys' basketball and track coach Keith Riley received word he'd earned induction into the National High School Athletic Coaches Association (NHSACA) Hall of Fame.

But no one knew. "I don't tell people that," Riley said.

After several months, Riley's wife, Merriel, told him to tell their sons, Brian and Geoff.

Hill City principal Alan Stein recently discovered Riley's honor. One day, Stein came

up to Riley and had a serious expression. Stein asked Riley, in mock seriousness, "Do you need to tell me something?"

Riley didn't know what Stein was talking about.

Riley said no. Again Stein said in mock seriousness, "I think you need to tell me something."

"I didn't know what the heck he was talking about," Riley said.

Stein released the information last week. Riley will be honored at the NHSACA's national convention June 17 in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

SEE **RILEY, B5**

Brian, an eighth grade teacher and boys' basketball coach in Wellsville, and Geoff, a dentist in Kansas City, both played for their dad and are expected to accompany their parents on the trip.

"They want to go to Jackson Hole, and we are going to go up there," coach Riley said Friday afternoon.

This year's class includes 28 coaches from 19 states, according to the NHSACA release. The release said Riley was selected by the Kansas State High School Activities Association and based on longevity, service to high school athletics, honors and other specific state criteria.

Riley, a Dighton native, came to Hill City after he graduated from Fort Hays State University in 1967. Riley took over the track program and served as assistant boys' basketball coach for one year before he became head boys' coach.

In track, Riley won titles in 1969, 1970, 1971, 1978, 1979 and 1997 on the boys' side and 1976 on the girls' side. In boys' basketball, Riley collected crowns in 1970, 1978 and 1998.

But Riley, who has won more than 625 games in his Hill City career, has consistently overachieved on the basketball court and qualified at least one boy to the state track meet every year except last spring.

"His longevity, and his passion," said Brad Eckols, Hill City's cross country coach for the last 19 years and an Illinois native.

"He is still so passionate about what he coaches, but his longevity is just

so impressive. He would have been my high school coach. There are so many coaches, especially in some of the more high-pressure sports who really get burned out, but his passion is still there, and that's why his longevity is just so impressive."

Riley has stayed away from parental issues that can halt a coaches' career. In basketball, Riley considers himself a "disciplinarian" who heavily focuses on the fundamentals. In track, Riley is "more loose and easy" and tries to make the sport fun.

"You are not going to make parents happy," Riley said. "Basketball, you are only going to play with five guys, and I don't play 10 guys and sub a lot of people. I never have done that. I just haven't been very successful doing that. I don't worry about parents. It's what the kids think. They know who should play, and who shouldn't play. It's pretty easy there."

In basketball, Riley takes a different tact from many coaches. Hill City doesn't play a preseason tournament and Riley tries to backload the Ringnecks' schedule to play its best basketball in February. In track, Riley will usually only have his jumpers take one jump in early season meets so they can peak at regionals.

Riley doesn't want many seniors, especially those who aren't playing. This year's team went 14-9 and lost to eventual state runner-up Plainville in the sub-state championship game with two seniors.

"If you have seniors sitting on the bench, then you are going to have

problems," Riley said.

This year, Riley believed his team again overachieved. Hill City averaged just 9.2 turnovers per game.

"We never turn the ball over, that's the only reason why we win," Riley said.

Hill City lost three games in the league tournament in mid-January, but won 10 of its final 12 before the 56-49 sub-state loss to Plainville. In the sub-state semifinals, Hill City defeated a talented Oakley team 48-45, the second time the Ringnecks beat Oakley.

Hill City kept Oakley from fast breaking and took away the drive on offense.

"Us beating Oakley twice probably should never have happened," Riley said.

Riley called Plainville a more talented team, but Hill City took away the Cardinals' fast break, outscored Plainville 22-8 in the fourth quarter when it ran a half court pressure man to man defense. Hill City nearly closed to two points with 35 seconds left when a 3-pointer bounced in and out.

Only four Ringnecks played in all 23 games and the top five players combined for 90 percent of their points.

"When kids start to be sophomores or juniors in basketball, they realize where they are at," Riley said.

"In track, it's easy. You line them and say, 'Why am I not on this relay?' Well, let's go find out. You run them up here and see. Basketball is a little bit different, but when you see them everyday and in practice, it's pretty easy to pick your starting five."