Family first
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By Francis Davis

Coach-player relationship catching up with sibling bond for Whitehall’s McLean brothers

The McLean brothers want to do the Harbaugh brothers one better.

Jim and John Harbaugh famously coached on opposing sides at this year’s Super Bowl, which meant that only one of them, John, left the field victoriously. Jim, on the other hand, nearly ate his hat as he stomped along the sidelines watching his San Francisco 49ers fall to the Baltimore Ravens.

Zach and Casey McLean hope only to do a victory dance together at this week’s State B boys’ basketball tournament at the Butte Civic Center.

Zach McLean, 31, is the Whitehall head coach, as well as the older brother of Whitehall’s senior star point guard Casey McLean, 17.

Zach has coached the Trojans for three years, leading his squad to state each season.

Casey has made the all-conference team two years running and is averaging 24.7 points per game this season — the most in District 5B. And no high school basketball fan would be surprised if he’s named to the all-state team. He’s also getting some interest from Frontier Conference colleges — but first things first, said his older brother.

“I told him you have time to decide on those things,” Zach said. “The big thing with us and our team now is to not look ahead. Cherish state. Enjoy it and take everything in. It’s something special, especially here in Montana.”

TOUGH AT FIRST

Casey said it took some time to get used to his brother as his coach, but now he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It was a little weird at first,” Casey said. “We definitely went through some hard times, but once we started clicking on the same page I couldn’t have asked for a better coach. He’s helped me become a better player.”

Part of the challenge was changing the dynamic between the brothers. Zach said he now considers his younger brother an extension of himself on the court.

“When we are on the floor, it’s a coach-player relationship,” Zach said. “It was tough at first, but I think it’s truly made us closer... And I never thought I’d be so concerned with his academics.”

Zach understands the pressure of being a star athlete in a small town, as he was one himself at Whitehall, where he averaged 19 points and six assists during his senior year in 2000 before going on to play college
ball at Montana State University-Northern. He graduated from Northern in 2005 with a degree in Business Technology.

Zach also was a point guard, but at 5-foot-10, he was more of the prototypical point, while 6-foot-1 Casey is cut in the mold of a Derek Rose, a physical point that can manage the game but also get his own shot when necessary.

“He creates his own shot, does a good job of creating shots for others, and his size and strength are an advantage,” Zach said. “He’s bigger and stronger than I ever was.”

Basketball runs in the family. The brothers have different mothers, but their father, Mike McLean, coached at Willow Creek High School and their uncle, Bob McLean, was a longtime basketball coach at Twin Bridges.

“We talk basketball all the time,” Zach said. “If we watch basketball on TV, we’ll watch the different defenses the teams are playing and talk about it. All summer long we talked about how teams might defend us and where he was comfortable on the floor, things like that.”

BROTHERS BEING BROTHERS

Of course, the two are still brothers, and like all brothers they’ll hassle one another from time to time. Like when Zach moved back into their parents’ house after having graduated from college and lived for a few years in Bozeman.

“He always gives me a bad time about moving back home when I was 25 years old,” Zach said, smiling. “I was in the process of moving (from Bozeman) and buying my wife a ring, and I didn’t have a lot of money. He thought it was pretty funny.”

Things worked out well for Zach. He’s married with a child, coaching his old high school team at the state tournament.

And if the pressure of the tournament weren’t enough, Zach and his wife Sammie are expecting their second child. The baby is due next week.

“She’s feeling the pressure of the kid and the tournament,” Zach said. “She’s a pretty special lady…. Coaching takes time away from the family and she’s really supportive. It takes a lot to be a coach’s wife.”

It also takes a lot to be brothers who are the coach and the top player, but for the McLeans it has turned out to be something special.