

Aldridge leaves Prairie for women's program at Clark

Legendary coach led Falcons to six state titles in 32 years

**Ken Vance
Editor**

After 32 years as the head coach of the Prairie High School girls' basketball program, Al Aldridge has decided to leave the school to become the women's coach at Clark College.

The formal announcement was made at a luncheon press conference at Clark College on April 11. Aldridge said the decision was made after he was approached by Clark's Director of Athletics Charles Guthrie and Denny Huston, Guthrie's predecessor at the college, and after consultation with Prairie Athletic Director Travis Drake.

"I wasn't planning on it, that's for sure," said the 61-year-old Aldridge of his ca-

reer move.

Aldridge, whose Falcons won the girls' Class 3A state title a little more than a month ago, didn't expect the opportunity to be presented to him.

"I was shocked and flattered," Aldridge said of the recruiting pitch from Guthrie and Huston. "It's just a terrific opportunity and a great challenge."

In 32 years at Prairie, Aldridge's teams won 710

games and six state championships. He knows he has work to be done to have that kind of success with the Penguins in the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges (NWAACC).

"I think the game is pretty much the same," said Aldridge, comparing the two levels of play. "I know there have been times when I felt like our high school teams at Prairie were better than the Clark teams.

Hopefully, we're going to change that."

Prior to winning the state title this year, Aldridge spoke of his goal to win seven state championships before his Prairie career was over, evidence that he wasn't planning a move from the school. He said the timing was right and the pitch from Guthrie and Co. was persuasive.

"Going out on top as a state champion is part of it,"

Aldridge said. "It's just a combination of everything. I know I love my kids who are coming back at Prairie and I miss them like heck already. I talked to my wife Jeannie and other people who mentor me and know that my life goal has been to coach



AL ALDRIDGE had plenty of opportunities to cut down the nets after winning six state titles as well as numerous district and league championships in his 32 years at Prairie High School.

Photo by Mike Schultz

in college and when the opportunity presented itself, I thought I better not turn it down."

Aldridge admitted his goal has been to coach women's basketball at the Division I or Division II level, but he said that just wasn't realistic at this time.

"Those opportunities don't present themselves very often to male coaches in a female sport who have no college experience," he said.

Aldridge takes over a Clark program that went 21-8 last year under coach Nancy Boone, who stepped down after the season. The Penguins will lose their top six players, who were all sophomores at the two-year school, so Aldridge needs to hit the recruiting trail to rebuild the roster. He started that process over the past weekend when he traveled to a showcase event in Alaska.

"We have 4-5 kids coming back and a couple of red shirts so it's pretty much going to be a brand new start," Aldridge said. "Hopefully, we can compete and for an NWAACC Championship soon. I think there is a lot of talent in Southwest Washington. It's just a matter of keeping some of that talent at home and not letting all of it get away."

Aldridge said he plans to continue to coach the Columbia Cascades Basketball Clubs, an AAU program he has used to develop his high school players in the summer months.

Even though the talent level will be very similar to that of his elite Prairie teams, Aldridge said he thinks he will enjoy coaching college-age players.

"It will be nice to have a

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more active part in the kid's lives as far as helping them pursue their careers and adjust to the rigors of independence and college life," he said.

Aldridge said he hopes the best for the Falcons' program he is leaving behind, which he believes has enough talent to win another state championship next season. He also knows the next coach will have high expectations to meet.

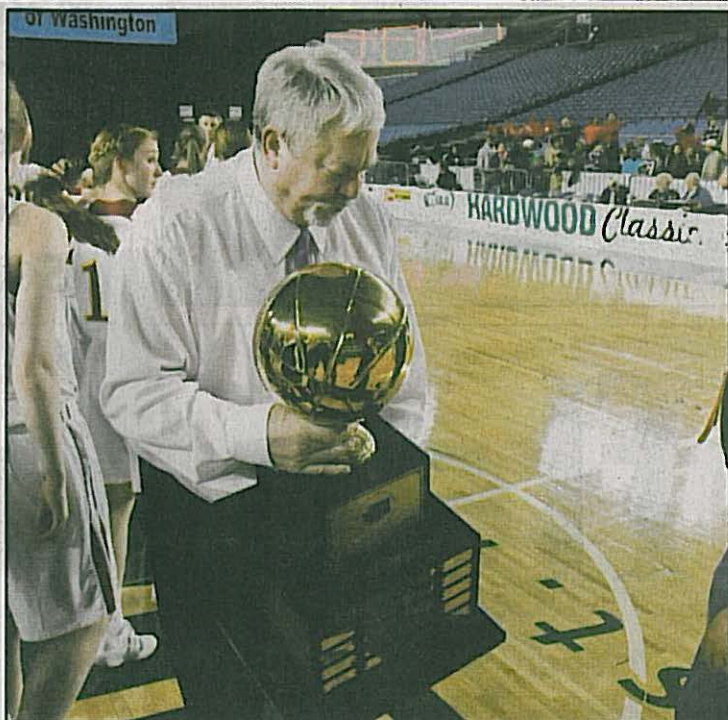
"It won't be easy I know that," Aldridge said of sustaining the high level of success. "Yes, there's a bunch of talent but there are probably coaches who don't want to commit to the magnitude of that job."

Aldridge said it was difficult to look back on 32 years, 710 wins and six state titles and pick a single favorite moment in his career. He did point out the back-to-back championships Prairie won in 1993 and 1994, and again in 1998 and 1999. He also cherishes the memory of serving as one of the coaches in the 2000 National All-American Game in Hartford, CT on national television (ESPN).

"It's been a great ride," he said. "I've been fortunate to have lots and lots of really good players. I think we raised the bar for our athletes so they would strive for excellence."

Al Aldridge career highlights

- Graduated from Fort Vancouver High School in 1968.
- Ran track at Mt. Hood Community College on a track scholarship, later received his B.A. degree from Central



AL ALDRIDGE cradles one of the six state championship trophies that he helped the Prairie girls' basketball program win in his 32 years.

Photo by Mike Schultz

Washington University and his master's degree from Lewis & Clark College.

- Aldridge played water polo throughout his college career and participated in three national championships. Started the water polo team at David Douglas High School in Portland and compiled a 131-10 record that included six trips to the state finals and three state championships.

- Began coaching freshman girls' basketball at Battle Ground High School in 1977. Compiled a 31-1 record.

- Started the Prairie girls' basketball program when the school opened in the fall of 1979.

- In 32 years at Prairie, Aldridge compiled a 710-134 record

(.841 winning percentage) including 27 straight winning seasons, 16 straight league titles and 15 district championships in the last 16 years.

- Won back-to-back state titles in 1993 and 1994 and again in 1998 and 1999.

- In 2000, Aldridge was selected as the WBCA National Runner-Up Coach of the Year. He coached in the National All-American Game in Hartford, CT on national television (ESPN).

- Under Aldridge's leadership, the Falcons went 27-1 this season and claimed the Class 3A state title, the sixth in the program's history.

- Aldridge also led Prairie's award-winning band for 31 years (winning 170 trophies) and also previously served as the head coach of the girls' softball team.