

Kay Yow blazed a trail for sports and humanity

The path Kay Yow walked was a remarkable one by any measuring stick. The record alone speaks for itself and does so with the kind of bona fides that imply legend.

- Thirty-eight seasons as a coach.
- A record of 737-344.
- Four ACC tournament titles.
- Twenty NCAA tournament bids and one Final Four appearance.
- An Olympic gold medal.
- Hall of Fame induction.

Yes, Kay Yow, the venerable coach of the N.C. State women's basketball team who died Saturday at age 66 after a more than two-decade battle with cancer, certainly qualifies as a landmark figure when it comes to women's basketball. But when the history of women's athletics is written, the daughter of Hilton and Lib Yow of Gibsonville will likely be remembered as so much more.

Yow was an athlete, an educator and tireless crusader who never seemed to be on a crusade at all. She was a fighter and competitor who approached life with passion but not anger. She was shaped by a profound faith and unshakable beliefs — traits she seamlessly passed on to those she touched without demand. She was an inspiration to her family, players, friends and peers. She was a pioneer in not only women's athletics but athletics for all. And ultimately she was a heroine who took on cancer with courage and grace.

To understand Yow's journey, it's helpful to know where it began. Her parents were both athletes who loved games but were unafraid of hard work. They established a strong support system for son Ronnie (a football player at Clemson) and daughters Kay, Debbie and Susan. In fact, it wasn't unusual for Hilton Yow to call area newspapers and ask for more coverage of games involving his soon-to-be famous daughters. Such prodding was needed in those days.

Kay Yow played basketball at Gibsonville High School but, ironically, when she enrolled at what was then called East Carolina College, there was no women's basketball team. She studied to be a teacher and librarian — her life in sports seemingly at an end.

But after graduating from ECC, Yow became a teacher at Allen Jay High School and was asked to coach girls basketball — a field at that time largely inhabited by men. Her team was successful right away, which led to a job coaching women's basketball at what was then Elon College.

When Title IX mandated that schools provide equal athletic opportunities for females, Yow took over at N.C. State with a mandate to meet those guidelines. She did, directing her team in the same way then-coach Norman Sloan managed the men's program — right down to running her own summer basketball camp.

Yow's younger sisters followed her trail. Debbie became a coach at the University of Kentucky and University of Florida. She is now the athletic director at the University of Maryland, where the football coach and men's basketball coach are among those who work for her. Susan became an All-American playing for her sister at N.C. State and later became a coach at Providence University and the WNBA. She is now the coach at Belmont Abbey College.

While the influence of the Yow family on college athletics can't be overestimated, the lasting memory of Kay Yow may be her fight with breast cancer. She was first diagnosed in 1987 and from that point became an advocate for raising not only money to fight the disease but awareness for those who are its potential victims. She served on the board of the V Foundation for Cancer Research named for the late Jim Valvano, her friend and colleague who died of cancer in 1993. A research fund will also be established in her name through ESPN.

Kay Yow's memorable path began in Gibsonville on a dirt basketball court, and Saturday it will end when she's buried near her family homeplace. In between she touched too many lives to count.

And most are better for having traveled with her.

