

# No Better Exit: Rick Mahoney's Final Game

By Ron Kim, associate dean of faculty and instructor in history



On Saturday, February 28, 2009, the girls varsity basketball team capped Rick Mahoney's coaching career by defeating Phillips Andover 51-48. For Mahoney '61, '74, '95 (Hon.); P'88, P'92, who had coached boys varsity from 1972 to 1974 and the girls team for the past 27 years, the victory was as fitting as it was improbable.

In his view, the basketball court was always an extension of the classroom—a place to learn fundamental skills and to hone them through practice and dedication. The court was also the place to appreciate the values of hard work, intensity, commitment, heart and resilience. Mahoney never measured a season's success by wins and losses, but rather by how the players improved, their belief in each other and their dedication to the team. Education on the court was about teaching proper values, and *(continued on page 101)*

*(Top) Rick Mahoney began coaching varsity basketball in 1972. He served three years as head coach for the boys team. (Middle) In 1983, Mahoney became head coach of the girls varsity basketball team, a position he held for 27 years. (Bottom) Mahoney treated the basketball court as an extension of the classroom and was more concerned with how his players improved and worked as a team than wins and losses.*

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## Mahoney

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these values would provide a foundation for life. And, in his final game, they would also carry the day for Mahoney's beloved Big Red.

Three months earlier, a fan of girls basketball might have circled the Exeter-Andover finale as the likely clash between the two top teams in New England. Both teams were talented and both had won impressively early in the season. But Exeter's skilled senior point guard, Jill Lyon, went down with a season-ending shoulder injury, and talented and high-scoring upper co-captains, Kelly and Shannon Comolli, were sidelined respectively with a fractured finger and a badly sprained ankle. Short-handed, the Exeter girls were thumped 56-41 in their early February duel at Andover, but they also persevered—going 4-4 over their final eight games prior to the rematch with an Andover team that had won 16 of its previous 17 games.

The season-ending contests against Andover are unlike any other games. The stands are full of students and adults in Exeter red and Andover blue. The noise, ranging from a din to banging to loud roars, makes normal communication between teammates impossible. Emotion and drama can change games, and the energy helped sustain Exeter's efforts on that day. After a well-played half by both teams, a tough and confident Andover team led 33-25.

For much of the second half, the two teams traded baskets, and Andover's stubborn lead remained—but then Exeter began to cut into the deficit. On offense, upper Tamar Nisbett went on a scoring spree. On defense, Mahoney—a disciple of person-to-person defense—went to zone, confusing Andover's offense and forcing long shots that clanged off the rim.

In the game's final two minutes, Andover clung to a one-point lead, 48-47. Exeter repeatedly attempted to take the lead but Andover's defense stiffened. With 40 seconds remaining, Kelly Comolli drove the right side but was cut off. With Andover's defense converging on the ball, upper center Louise Breen received a pass in the key, 10 feet from the basket. Breen, whose previous shot had been blocked, got the shot off before the defender could close. The ball nuzzled the rim before rolling in. 49-48, Exeter. Timeout, Andover.

After drawing up a play during its timeout, the Andover team again had trouble on the offensive end. Exeter prep Sylvia Okafor hounded Andover's point guard, leading to a rushed shot that Kelly Comolli rebounded before being fouled. She sank two free throws, despite shooting with her broken finger. Andover's final desperation shot fell harmlessly, and a sea of red-and-white jerseys jumped together in a huddled mass of jubilation.

In the stands, Mahoney's family, friends, and more than a dozen former players hugged and exulted in an improbable—yet fitting—ending. After the game, at a retirement party organized by his wife, Linda, Mahoney reflected on the stunning victory. It was a win, he said, that came from as much hard work, intensity and heart as he had ever seen in a team. ●

## New Conditioning Program

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promoting proper techniques so that athletes can control their bodies when they compete. "During competition, athletes are going 100 percent—they are not holding anything back," she continues. "If we train and fine-tune their motor skills before competition—proper jumping and landing technique, core stability and running form—it will become second nature, ultimately helping to reduce injuries." The end result will be athletes playing more and performing better. "Their first step will be faster; they'll have more speed and more power in each step or push," says Sweet.

For Gregory Newton '10, a varsity basketball player who worked out in the evenings after class, preseason conditioning led to quick results. "I gained weight as I grew stronger, improved my quickness, explosiveness and speed," he says.

Team coaches have seen the positive effects of the new conditioning programs. Field Hockey Coach Mercy Carbonell '96 (Hon.) recalls, "In one two-hour conversation with Coach Sweet, I learned more about strength and conditioning than I have in years." As for how the team responded to the new workout program, Carbonell says, "They loved the workouts. Sweet challenged them to work muscles they may have forgotten they had while demanding that they pay careful attention to their form."

For injured athletes, the strength and conditioning program provides a well-designed path back to competitive play. Athletic trainers work with the school physical therapist to develop a plan for each injury. A student might typically spend time in the training room for initial rehab activities—such as the whirlpool and icing—and then progress to the weight room or the pool before returning to competition. The trainers and physical therapist closely monitor progress throughout the recovery period.

Swimmer Erin Metcalf '09 is a fan of the program: "We do a lot of stabilization work, which has helped everyone ward off problems. I feel stronger. I'm already going faster now than I was at this point in the season last year. I know that once we rest up for our championship meet, it's going to really show." ●



MIKE CANANO

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