

January 16, 2023

By Dennis Garcia  
SportsTone.net

RAMSEUR - When first-year Eastern Randolph High School boys varsity basketball coach Johnny Thomas had his introductory meeting with prospective players and parents last year, he outlined his philosophies, his expectations and assured them that the Wildcats were going to be a team that would be very successful once the next season began.

Not everyone, including parents, players or community members, truly believed what Thomas was saying. After all, the Wildcats had not enjoyed a winning campaign since the 2015-16 season, including a 1-23 record in 2017-18.

"I remember when we had the introduction meeting and I told them that Eastern Randolph was going to be a really, really good team, I heard giggles," Thomas recalled. "I heard the snickering."

No one is laughing now.

Entering the second half of Piedmont Athletic Conference play this week, the Wildcats were a perfect 6-0. After a season-opening non league loss to Southwest Guilford, the Wildcats have registered 15 straight victories, most in absolute runaways. The quick-as-lightning, up-and-down Wildcats have surpassed the 90-point plateau seven times and that includes a 103-point effort against Western Harnett. ER has roared to victories of 29 points, 32 points, 33 points, 45 points, 52 points and 56 points.

"At the interest meeting, we had guys who weren't paying attention, some were wearing hats, some hoodies and some had their heads on their desks," Thomas recalled. "I introduced myself and told them we were going to run this program like a college program. We are going to run and we were going to prove to everyone that we are in for great things."

The doubt didn't bother Thomas, who has gained incredible basketball knowledge through his high school years at West Carteret and Greensboro Day, his collegiate experience with N.C. State and Marshall, his D-League and professional years overseas and his five-year stint as a



*ERHS coach Johnny Thomas. Photo provided by J Thomas.*

member of the Harlem Globetrotters. He believed in what he said and now the trick was getting the players to believe.



*ERHS senior DaVonte Brooks. Photo provided by J Thomas.*

But it wasn't easy. And everything had to start with a new culture. The players quickly received that message during summer workouts.

"We spent the first two weeks just on the track, running long distance and sprints," Thomas said. "We were going to run, and to run you have to be in shape. I Had guys not come out because there was so much running involved. There were a lot of people that said this isn't going to work.

"We had very intense summer workouts and I'm the type of coach who is going to hold you accountable," Thomas added. "I always want to push kids to their greatest point and we had all the potential in the world. We were lacking discipline and we were lacking commitment. I told them right from the start that if they didn't want to commit, you would be kicked off. Everyone had to earn time and pass their classes."

Once the players realized Thomas had a plan and he was going to stick to that plan, they began understanding just how good this team could be. Even with much of the start of the season hampered by the success of the football team, Thomas and the players dug in.

"Before we got all our football guys, there were still people who didn't believe in us," Thomas said. "There were a lot of people saying we weren't good enough. Then we lost that first game and even though we lost, I saw what this team could be. I saw exactly what we were going to do."

And that was to win.

Behind incredible efforts from DaVonte Brooks (24.7 points and 13 rebounds per game), Timothy Brower (15.6 points), Pierce Leonard (10.7 points), Nichah Taylor (10.5 points), Julian Brooks, Connor Carter, William Stalker and others, the Wildcats have used the high-octane offensive approach to leave many in the dust.

"(A fast-paced style) is something I have always done in travel ball and the kids really enjoy it and it's exciting," said Thomas, who operates Rising Pros

Training, an organization that teaches skills to young players in order to improve their game



*Wildcats senior Pierce Leonard. Photo provided by J Thomas.*

and quality of life. "It's college basketball. I have nothing against slowing it down and setting plays up, but the problem with that from my professional experience is that sometimes you have guys who can play in that system, but it's not good basketball. The one thing I wanted to bring to Eastern Randolph was a college-type game. We are going to press you from the start to the end. I push these guys really, really hard and we practice hard. This is just not basketball. It's how life works."



Coming off a season in which the Wildcats finished 2-10 in the conference and 8-15 overall, ER is currently a top five team in the Western Region. It is a result of incredible hard work by the student athletes and a coaching staff that gave the players the tools needed to enjoy one of the most successful seasons in school history.

"There are three things," Thomas said.

"One, we want to prove everyone who said we couldn't do it wrong. Second, we

want to play for our friends and family and show what hard work can bring. And third, we are going to continue to play that exact way every game we play."

Why change a thing?