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Career's not a wrap for ironman trainer

By Tom Kensler
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Larry Willock is a member of two halls of fame for athletic trainers. (Karl Gehring, The Denver Post)

At age 62, Larry Willock figured earlier this year it was time for him to retire and return to his home state of New Mexico, where he could spend more time with a rod and reel in his hands. That is, until University of Colorado men's basketball coach Jeff Bzdelik gave him a call.

Willock was Air Force's athletic trainer for men's basketball during Bzdelik's two seasons at the academy. He is a member of two halls of fame: the New Mexico Athletic Trainers Hall of Fame (1994)

and the Rocky Mountain Athletic Trainers Hall of Fame (1999). Prior to taping up CU players for a recent practice, Willock sat down for a chat.

Q: So, Larry, we have to ask. Are you trying to work your way to every major college along the Front Range?

A: I guess it must look like that. I seem to be trying to set a record for retiring. I took an early retirement at the University of New Mexico because you can do that after 25 years there. Then I thought it might be fun to work at the Air Force Academy, and I did that for 12 years. Then Coach Bzdelik convinced me to come here. I didn't want the highlight of my day being what time "Oprah" came on TV. I thought there's got to be something more.

Q: Most college basketball trainers sit next to the coaches. Why do you prefer to work from the row behind the bench?

A: I find that's the best place to service the team. We're giving them cups of water. We're looking over their shoulder asking if they have cuts, any distress, the look on their face. Kids know this: There will be a towel placed on their lap and a cup will be offered over their right shoulder. That way, they can keep their full attention on the coach.

Q: You are well into your fourth decade in the profession. What keeps you excited about going to work each day?

A: It's the enthusiasm of young players. We have a really young team at Colorado. That's when you can really have an influence and help the program succeed. I'm very enthusiastic about where this team will be in three years. I want to be a part of that. That keeps you young.

Q: The tough part?

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A: Kids think an injury is the end of the world. It's hard to see that. Helping them stay positive can be difficult. The motivation techniques I use haven't changed. You have to get them to believe in themselves, believe that they can overcome.

Q: Any "old school" remedy you still use?

A: Pickle juice.

Q: Pickle juice? Sweet or dill?

A: Dill. We use it for cramps. It has always been used in the Southern part of the country, where it's hot and humid. People worked in the fields and there were pickle barrels. They would sip the pickle juice and then eat the pickles at night. If I have a kid that has a tendency toward cramps, I'll give him 2 ounces of pickle juice, followed by all the water he wants. It's amazing how, in a few minutes, it can make a big difference.

Q: Jeff Bzdelik did tell you that Big 12 road trips won't take you to places nearly as picturesque as in the Mountain West, didn't he?

A: Yes (with a chuckle). But I'm excited to see new places and feel the crowds at those places.

Q: Let's wrap this up with one of your favorite memories.

A: It was at the 1983 Final Four in Albuquerque. I got to work it as a host athletic trainer, and I was assigned to North Carolina State and Coach Jim Valvano. He was an amazing motivator. The first thing he did when he got to The Pit for practice was, he had his staff hand him what looked like an eyeglass case, black velvet. He popped that thing open and made sure it had a pair of silver-plated trainer's scissors. Then he brought his team in and sat them in front of the blackboard. He opened up

that little box and said, "Men. We're going to use those scissors to cut down the nets." Obviously, Jim and the team got to do just that.

Top five

Favorite road-trip destinations:

1. San Diego — It's just a beautiful place to visit.
2. Hawaii — It's too bad my trips there for games only lasted a couple of days.
3. New York City — During an NIT with Air Force, we went on a fireboat to the Statue of Liberty as guests of the mayor.
4. Salt Lake City — I'm a bit of a history buff and there's certainly a lot of history there.
5. Albuquerque — After having worked there for so long with the University of New Mexico, when I was at Air Force, I got to feel the intimidation of The Pit as a visitor.

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