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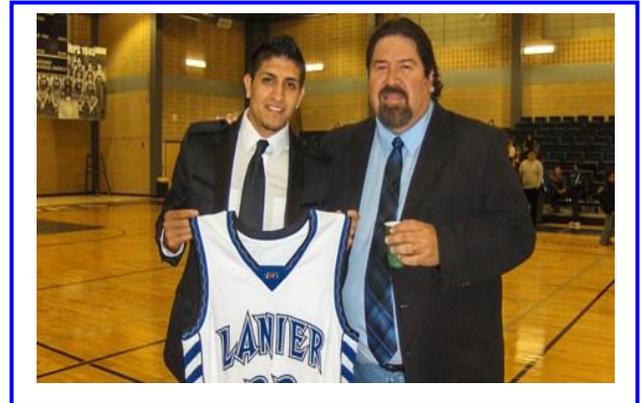
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By David Flores / Kens5.com

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As the final days of his long, stellar career as boys basketball coach at Lanier wind down like sand falling in an hour glass, Rudy Bernal has kept his emotions in check by doing what he's always done.



Focus on the Voks' next game.

"I'm trying to stress to my players that I don't want them getting caught up in all that," Bernal said Tuesday night, while scouting the Seguin-Alamo Heights game. "That's the least of what I want them to be thinking about. I'd much rather they focus on what's at hand and winning basketball games."

After 31 seasons at the only school where he's been a head coach, Bernal is stepping down at Lanier to spend more time with his family and begin a new chapter in his career. While he's leaving Lanier, Bernal has made it clear he's not through with coaching.

He plans to coach at a San Antonio private school next season, following such highly successful former public-school basketball coaches as Charlie Boggess (Alamo Heights) and John Valenzuela (Madison). Boggess and Valenzuela left their schools and have continued their careers at Antonian and San Antonio Christian, respectively, in recent years.

Unlike coaches at public schools, most coaches at private schools aren't required to spend the entire school day on campus.

"I like that I'll have more time during the day," said Bernal, who turns 59 Thursday. "I want to coach next year. I really don't want to take a whole lot of time off. If it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. But I'm going to look and see what's available."

But before he begins anew, Bernal will lead his beloved Voks on one more playoff run.

Lanier ended the regular season 24-7 and was 10-4 in District 28-4A, finishing third behind Brennan (13-1) and Edison (12-2). The Voks will play Buda Hays in the first round of the playoffs at 7 p.m. Tuesday at New Braunfels High School.

Bernal has 567-441 career record at Lanier

Despite Bernal's efforts to deflect attention, his players leave no doubt that his impending departure from Lanier will give them extra incentive to make a long postseason run.

"He has meant so much to Lanier for so many years," senior guard Louis Garza said. "I've learned a lot from him and other guys that played for him. We talk about it every day, every week, that we want to make it to the state tournament. His last year is our last year as seniors, and we want to make it big."

Bernal's influence on his players extends far beyond the basketball court. Balancing his demanding coaching style with father-like guidance, Bernal has a knack for connecting with the inner-city kids he works with every day.

"I can't imagine Lanier without him," senior wing Arnulfo "Ajax" Reyes said. "He's always kept me on the right track. He's like our dad to us. He just tells us to believe in ourselves, and we just take it from there. We just motivate ourselves as teammates."

Lanier has gone 567-441 and made the playoffs 15 times, including 12 of the past 15 seasons, under Bernal. The Voks made the Class 4A state tournament in 2000 and 2001, losing in the semifinals and finals, respectively.

Lanier not only faces hurdles off the court as an inner-city school surrounded by neighborhoods on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, the Voks traditionally have undersized teams. But neither Bernal nor his players ever concede anything to opponents.

"One thing we always have to have is maximum effort," Bernal said. "We push that all the time in all aspects of our players' lives, especially the classroom. We have expectations of our players, on and off the court."

The best player Bernal has coached is Orlando Mendez-Valdez, who graduated from Lanier in 2004 and went on to an All-America career at Western Kentucky. Mendez plays professionally in Mexico and is a member of the Mexican national team.

"His senior year in college was just phenomenal," Bernal said. "It showed all the work he had put into making himself a better player. He also made his teammates around him so much better as well."

Seeing him grow as a player was great because he started with nothing. He didn't have anything growing up. But he made himself a great player."

Bernal's late father played on Lanier state champ in 1943

Lanier's high-water mark under Bernal came in the 2001 state tournament at the Erwin Center in Austin, where it faced two future NBA players. The Voks beat Chris Bosh and Dallas Lincoln in the semifinals and fell in the title game to Beaumont Ozen, which was led by Kendrick Perkins.

"When we went in that place, there weren't a whole lot of people who gave us a chance," Bernal said. "But all the people in San Antonio, the inner city and from our district knew that we had a great chance."

The two appearances in the state tournament galvanized the proud Lanier community and woke up the echoes of the Voks' glory days under legendary coach Nemo Herrera, who led the predominantly Hispanic school to state titles in 1943 and 1945.

Herrera coached at Lanier for 17 years, and guided the Voks to the state tournament six times in 15 seasons (1931-45). Lanier finished runner-up in 1939, third in 1942 and 1944, and lost in the first round in 1931.

Bernal has a deep emotional bond with the Voks that transcends his role as their coach. His late father, Ramiro, was a senior starter on the 1942-43 team that won Lanier's first state championship.

Bernal graduated from Lee High School, but he grew up hearing stories about Herrera and the Voks from his father and an uncle, Joe Bernal, who was a senior on the 1943-44 squad.

Large photos of the 1943 and 1945 state champions hang on a wall in the Lanier Alumni Center, the Voks' home gym.

Family background prepared Bernal for coaching

Bernal's eyes get misty whenever he talks about his father, who was a decorated World War II veteran and died in 2008. His mother, Mary Louise, died three years later.

"Even with my father not being around, I feel that he is because I get to see him every day," Bernal said, alluding to the photo in the Alumni Center. "I feel like I gained a lot from him by listening to the stories and watching him work every day and interact with the family. Family was very important to him. I felt like I owe him a lot.

"I look back and think of all the things he accomplished, and understand that he never really liked for people to give him anything. He wanted to feel like he earned everything. Toward the end of his life when we went to the V.A. (Veterans Administration), he never wanted to get anything back from the government, even though he had earned it."

The second of three children in his family, Bernal praised both of his parents for the guidance they gave him and his two sisters, Linda (Mora) and Roseanne (Vega).

"My mother was always there for us, too," Bernal said. "She was always a great supporter."

Bernal's family background prepared him for coaching and serving as a mentor to his players, many of whom come from tough circumstances.

"He always treats us like a father figure," Garza said. "He doesn't want us to get in trouble, and he wants us to do right. For instance, he takes away our car keys after practice in the morning just to make sure we don't go anywhere, like to lunch. We know he does that because he cares about us."

Lanier booster: Bernal coaches with 'tough love'

Bernal has cultivated such a family atmosphere in his program that all three of his assistant coaches, Joseph Martinez, Martin Cardenas and Henry Vidaurri, played for him.

Longtime Voks booster Alex Gonzales, who works with the youth ministry at La Trinidad United Methodist Church near Lanier, has a close relationship with Bernal and his players.

"There are two words that describe how Rudy works with those kids: tough love," Gonzales said. "He is tough. He is strict. And he loves them without any conditions. His legacy is going to continue for years and years and years down the road.

"The seeds that he planted in each one of these young men might not come to fruition until 10, 15, 20 years from now, but it was that seed that he planted that will last forever in these young men's lives. They will realize that there was somebody in their walk that really cared for them."

Gonzales said it's difficult to think about Lanier basketball without Bernal.

"There will definitely be a void," he said. "But at the same time, I will be rejoicing and my heart will be filled with gratitude for the journey that we have had."

It has been a great ride, indeed. Thanks for the memories, Coach Bernal.