

Kris Kern: A motivator and a dreamer who has built a winning culture like no other

Former Lancaster student and coach is closing in on 900 volleyball career wins



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It started as a simple, but intriguing question for Kris Kern. I messaged him and asked if he would be willing to sit down with me for an interview. I wanted to pick his brain about the key to all the success he has had as a high school and college volleyball coach.

I had never really talked with Kern much before we sat down for our interview a few weeks ago in Columbus. I knew who he was because his record speaks for itself – he has the most volleyball wins (762) in Ohio High School history and is closing in on 900 career wins at the high school and college levels combined – but I wanted to know what made him tick.

How can one coach be as successful as he has been? Ask any coach at any level and any sport, winning is hard, and should never be taken for granted, but Kern is a different breed.

What he is doing works because there is no way you can be that successful, regardless of where he is coaching, and have the longevity of success that he has.

I've covered high school sports for 30 years and I have never come across a coach as successful as Kern has been at so many different places and different levels.

Kern is passionate about what he is doing, he has core values that he believes in 100 percent and never deviates from them. He has a purpose in everything he does. He is tough on his players and demands a lot from them and, at the same, off the court, they know how much he cares about them.

He has a self-assuredness about him that all successful coaches have and sometimes it may rub people the wrong way, but Kern doesn't focus on that. He is laser-focused on his team and players and does whatever he can to make his program the best it can be.

More than anything, Kern is ultra-competitive, and one of his biggest strengths is he simply outworks most other coaches. He is dialed in. How many coaches can remember every player's jersey number who has played for him for the last 40 years? Kern can because he is invested and immersed in the process.

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As a coach, he never leaves a stone unturned. He spends countless hours watching game tapes of his opponents. While coaching Lancaster, he was facing an opponent in the tournament that had an 0-20 record. It was a foregone conclusion his team would win easily, but Kern drove to Zanesville to scout that team. He didn't want any surprises and wanted to make sure his squad was prepared.

"I wanted to know what I was getting into and wanted to make sure our kids knew what they were facing," Kern said. "Regardless of who we are playing, our team is always going to be prepared."

Building a winning culture every step of the way

Kern has built a winning culture everywhere he has coached, which began back in 1981 at Columbus Wehrle. He led the Wolverines to four league championships, two district titles, and a state Final Four appearance in 1990. From there, he coached at Pickerington and Pickerington North. In seven seasons at North, Kern compiled an amazing 172-14 record and guided the Panthers to seven Ohio Capital Conference championships and four district titles. North was 91-1 in OCC play, including an 86-match winning streak.

Kern would then return to his high school alma mater to coach Lancaster, where he won 300 games, 11 OCC championships and two Buckeye Athletic Conference titles. He coached at a few other high schools, including Logan Elm for one season in 2016. He once again worked his magic and led the Braves to a 28-1 record and a berth in the state tournament.



Kern would then test his coaching skills at the college level when West Virginia State University came calling in 2017. As he has done everywhere he has coached, Kern turned the Yellow Jackets into an instant winner even though they had only won four games the previous year.

In six seasons, Kern matched the single-season program record with 25 wins, which was the first winning season in almost a decade. Following a 30-5 season in 2021 that included a conference championship, Kern was named the Mountain East Conference Coach of the Year. His 125-54 record (.698) is the highest win percentage in WVSU history.

“I look at what a program was before I got there” and leaving it better than he found it was always his goal. “If you are true to yourself and true to the program, good things are going to happen. There are plenty of coaches that may know more than me, but none will outwork me,” he said.

In January, Kern was named the new volleyball coach at the University of Pikeville, a Division II school in Kentucky. Even though the Bears haven’t had a lot of success, there is no doubt Kern will turn the program around.

“I think my track record speaks for itself, so when I walk into a building they want to win and they want to know what it’s going to take to win,” Kern said. “Whenever I take over a program, I have rules and a standard that is cut and dried with my players, and it’s been that way my whole coaching career. At the same time, you have to allow your players to have fun and give them a chance to grow. More than anything, you want to make sure they have pride in the program.”

His love for Lancaster runs deep

There may not be another coach in Lancaster history that has had as much sustained success as Kern did while coaching the Gales.

When talking about Lancaster, it was obvious that he loves the school and the community.

“I have so much immense pride for Lancaster High School,” Kern said. “I walked the halls as a student. I cruised Memorial Drive when I was a high school kid and when I coached there, I felt obligated to turn that program into a winner. I left Lancaster because they went to an unrealistic pay to play or maybe I would still be there, but it will always hold a special place in my heart.”

Kern talked about how much he admired former Lancaster athletic director Gary Mauller and what he meant to Kern, personally.

“He is the best athletic director I have ever coached under,” Kern said. “During his time as AD, he hired some great head coaches at Lancaster, and all of them had a lot of success.

Kern also created the Karen D. Wohorer Memorial Volleyball Tournament at Lancaster in 1998 and the tournament still runs today. She was one of his dear friends who passed away from cancer.

One thing that did surprise me is the fact that Kern had so much success at Lancaster, yet he has not been inducted into the school’s Athletic Wall of Fame. With 300 wins and 13 league titles, he certainly deserves to be.

“Lancaster is my heart,” Kern said. “I grew up there, I graduated from there and I coached there. I’m always going to be a Gale. Lancaster is such a special place.”

A motivator and dreamer

Kern has coached volleyball for four decades, and his success is undeniable. For him to still be doing it at such a high level after all these years is incredible. I am amazed by the success he has had.

As our conversation winded down, a few things stuck out to me. Kern is about the chase. He is relentless, he is a motivator and a dreamer. He doesn’t cut corners. Ever. His passion for coaching and winning is part of his DNA.

“You have to have a dream and then put in the work to accomplish it,” Kern said. “Along the way, it’s going to be hard, but you can never quit, and you can never give up. I love the fact that I can have a positive impact on most of my players. Some kids don’t want to be coached hard, but as long as I’m coaching, I’m going to hold their feet to the fire, and at the same time, they know how much I care about them.”

I asked Kern one more time how can he motivate his players and get them to believe in something maybe they didn’t even think was possible and sustain his level of success.

He thought about it for a few seconds.

“What I care about is making a difference in young people's lives and allowing them to be so proud of their program, and more than anything, not to be

afraid to dream,” Kern said. “I try to go the extra mile in everything I do and make the experience as special as I can for my players to help them succeed.

“Players want to be told the truth and I don’t sugarcoat anything with them, and they want to have fun while they are playing. There is a balance, and it has worked. You have to be able to relate to your players, and they have to know that you truly care about them.”

Kern is not sure how much longer he will coach, but after he doesn’t look to be slowing down anytime soon. Pikeville is lucky to have him, and they need to get ready for the program to explode. His passion and desire to succeed are as strong as they have ever been.

It has been one heck of a ride for Kern, one that won’t be seen for a long time, if ever. He is the definition of greatness, something that is rarely seen. He is demanding and loyal to his players to a fault.

More than anything, Kern is a winner.

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