

757TEAMZ

Rubama: Lake Taylor's Hank Sawyer will coach with a heavy heart this season, but he knows it's his ministry



Lake Taylor football coach Hank Sawyer, left, prides himself on preaching, teaching, counseling and praying with his players. It's what has kept him going this season after losing his mother and a close friend in the past two months. (Freelance file)

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NORFOLK — This could very well be the toughest football season of Hank Sawyer’s coaching career.

And it has nothing to do with Lake Taylor’s talent or the team’s demanding schedule.

On July 8, he buried his close friend and assistant coach, Theodore Ford Sr. They had coached together for 22 years.

And on Wednesday, he buried his mother, Gloria Johnson.

These two people meant the *world* to Sawyer.



“That night when I got the news, I didn’t know if I wanted to coach anymore,” he told me. “That’s how much it affected me.”

He said going into the team’s first day of practice last month without Ford was surreal.

“Several players called me because they knew how difficult it was going to be for me,” said Sawyer, now in his 24th season at Lake Taylor and the elder statesman among South Hampton Roads coaches. “It was real difficult because everything we do here is him. All day, I’m turning around and looking for him. And it’s almost hard to believe that he’s not going to show up.”

The Lake Taylor High football team will honor assistant coach Theodore Ford Sr. this season with a patch. Ford passed away last month

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The death of his mother was even tougher because he’s a self-proclaimed “Mama’s boy.”

I can understand because like him, my life centered around my mother, [who passed away in March](#).

Sawyer, who knew his mother wouldn’t make it through the year because of illness, encouraged me after my mother’s passing.

When I learned about his mother while I was on vacation, I had to reach out to him.

I politely asked, “How difficult is it going to be to coach this season?”



Sure, he loves to win. He has led the Titans to six state title-game appearances with three championships. After Saturday's season-opening 37-18 victory over Camden, New Jersey, on his birthday, Sawyer's career record is now 229-62 with multiple Eastern District and region titles.

"A lot of these kids don't go to church," he said. "The bible says, 'How can they hear without a preacher?' You got to bring a preacher to them."



Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot
Lake Taylor football coach Hank Sawyer leads his team in prayer before a game against Churchland last season. (Stephen M. Katz/Staff)

And that's just what Sawyer does as he preaches, teaches, counsels, prays and loves on his players.

For some, he's the only father figure they know.

That's why this week has been so difficult, and why this season will be tough.

Without Ford and his mother, he feels lost. But he knows both of them would encourage him to keep going.



[I remember talking with his mother in 2010](#) when I wrote a story about Sawyer.

She always knew her son had all the qualities to be a great coach because he was humble, dedicated, loyal, caring, passionate and a leader.

“He’s dedicated to the young people and wants to see them succeed,” she told me.
“He’s a special person, and he’s been chosen by God to do a special work, and he does it well.”

She remembered when Sawyer came to her early in his coaching career and wondered if coaching was the right job for him.

“He was talking to other people, and they were telling him that he wasn’t going to make any big money coaching, so he asked me what I think,” she said. “And I told him, ‘There are a lot of people who go to work every day and work a job that they hate. If you have an opportunity to work a job that you love, then you take it. Money is not everything. So he went on and coached football.”



Lake Taylor coach Hank Sawyer getting his team ready for season opener against Camden High (NJ)

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Sawyer missed practice on Tuesday because of the viewing. He took the time to speak to well-wishers for hours.

His wife, Sandra, knew this was different for her husband.

“I don’t think he would miss football practice unless it was something like this,” she said. “Had his mother known he was going to be missing practice, she wouldn’t have wanted him to miss it. She was that type of woman. But his mom meant more to him than life itself.”

On the day of the funeral, he didn’t plan on going to practice. But Sandra had other plans.

“We left the repass and just kept driving,” she said. “He said, ‘Where are you going?’ And I told him, ‘You’re going to practice.’”

[Sandra is a legendary coach herself](#) and in fact has won more state titles than her husband, and jokingly reminds him about it. She has led the Titans girls basketball team to four state titles.

But she knows this season will be a difficult one for her husband.

“They were both very special people to him,” she said. “But she’ll be there in spirit. She’ll be looking down on him, he knows she will. I know he wants to win for Ford and for her.”

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