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By MICHAEL LEWIS

Staff Writer

ORMOND BEACH -- If you've ever started a club and had only one member show up for the first meeting, you can imagine how Keith McClenny felt three years ago.



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Robert King drives around Keon Patterson during a RedDevils practice at the Ormond Beach YMCA on June 10. Patterson, of Mainland High School, was the only player to show up for the program three years ago, and now he's playing for North Country Community College in Saranac Lake, N.Y.

The former Mainland High School basketball standout thought he'd hit upon a great idea: Find 18-24 year old former hoops players who were doing nothing with their lives, get them back on the college track and find some programs to let them play ball again.

But when only Keon Patterson showed up for the first few workouts at the Ormond Beach YMCA, well, let's just say it wasn't exactly encouraging.

"Five kids would say they were going to come, and then it'd be just me," Patterson recalled with a chuckle. "So Coach would set up the folding chairs and we'd do drills, and it was real quiet.

"But I believed in what we were doing, and I knew eventually other people would, too."

Patterson was right. What began with two people alone in the gym has mushroomed into something much bigger. In three years, McClenny's RedDevils program has blossomed exactly as he'd hoped.

As more and more kids, some literally off the streets, joined the year-round program that combines schoolwork and jump shots, small colleges began to take notice.

Including kids who will be starting school this fall, eight players who have played with the RedDevils will have earned basketball scholarships.

Several of them, like Patterson, had to travel quite far to chase the dream, to a tiny village in upstate New York called Saranac Lake.

But they're all headed in the right direction, with a focused plan for life that some were lacking before.

"We've helped a lot of kids, but we can still do more," the 37-year-old McClenny said, watching a recent practice. "This is something I believe so strongly in, and now finally we've got some role models I can point to, kids to who I can say, 'See, that kid was just like you. And now look at him.' "

SECOND CHANCE TO PLAY BALL

McClenny's program has some strict rules, as befitting a man who has been a coach for much of his life. While working for the Y, he's been an assistant coach at Father Lopez for the past nine seasons under coach Eddie Miller.

McClenny, a man with a quick smile but a voice that can cut through a gymnasium when it wants to, said the first thing he tells kids when they try out for the program is they have to be committed.

"Some kids come for a day or two, then they see how much work it is and I never see them again," McClenny said.

But the reason he can point to success stories like Marcus McDonald and Anthony Jones (both headed to North Country Community College in Saranac Lake, N.Y.) and Brennan Taylor (going to Warner University this fall) is that McClenny does what he promises, if the kid does what he promises.

Practices are held four days per week, for at least two hours per day. McClenny and his assistant coaches put the players through typical basketball drills, but a lot of the kids have been out of an organized program for a while, so of course they are at different levels of ability.

The RedDevils also play games against other area men's league teams, and occasionally travel out of the area.

The RedDevils players (10 are currently on the team) don't have to pay a dime to be a part of the team. McClenny eats the \$5,000-10,000 annual budget himself, and he and his coaches are all volunteers.

"Parents are always dubious about that, like, 'What's this guy's angle?' " McClenny said. "I tell them I used to be where those kids were, and I feel a need to help them. All I earn is sweat equity from the program."

"I wasn't sure what he was all about at first," said McDonald, a former player at Atlantic. "But I didn't have a whole lot else going on, so I figured I'd try it."

McClenny also promises the kids he "recruits" (mostly by going to high school games in the winter) that he will try to get them into college.

Assistant coach Derrick George cold-calls as many community college, junior college and four-year program coaches as he can, spreading the word about his kids.

Chad LaDue, the head coach at North Country, got several of those calls.

"He talked to me about Keon, and I took a chance on him," LaDue said. "He came up here and worked so hard and helped our program so much, that from then on I told him (George) to keep sending me his players."

Three other RedDevils have played or will soon play for LaDue.

"They're tough, they play the game the right way and they're grateful for the opportunity," LaDue said. "That's all you can ask for."

SCHOOL COMES FIRST

In exchange for helping them get back on an academic track, McClenny requires a few things of his charges.

First, they have to attend a weekly two-hour academic tutoring class run by McClenny's friend, Len Gasparly, who has done similar workshops in area prisons.

Gasparly helps the players improve their ACT or SAT scores, or work toward their G.E.D.

If the player misses one of the weekly sessions, he doesn't get to practice the rest of the week.

"And," Jones said, "you have to do a lot of running. A lot of running."

McClenny also demands the players show up on time and be respectful toward the coaches, or else, you guessed it, they're going to do a lot of running.

At a practice last week at the Y, while most of the team was working on defensive drills, one player was doing sprints from one end of the gym to the other, proof McClenny doesn't issue idle threats.

"Most of these kids think their career is over before they come here, and they're excited to be playing again," McClenny said. "But the academic part is so important, too, and some kids can't handle that."

Still, for the ones that can, there is a chance for a reward at the end. Patterson graduated from North Country and will be going to Norwich University in Connecticut this year. With so many success stories, and McClenny willing to give anyone who wants to be committed a chance, the excuses for not giving the RedDevils a chance are running out. As word gets out more and more, with kids like Patterson, Jones and McDonald telling their friends about the RedDevils, McClenny envisions growing the program.

"I feel like there's a lot more kids we can reach," McClenny said. "I was where those kids used to be, so I know how it feels to not have any direction or motivation. But you get them back in the gym, and tell them they have a chance at a good future, and it can turn their life around."

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For more information on the RedDevils program

Visit reddevilsbasketball.org , or contact Keith McClenny at keith@reddevilsbasketball.org or at 386-846-8394.

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