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Science Hill alum Crowder continues winning ways

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Science Hill graduate Brien Crowder has been called a "poor man's Larry Brown" and "Briefcase Brien," and now he's been called "Coach of the Year" in four decades.

Crowder just completed his second season at Immokalee High School (Fla.) and was named the Naples Daily News All-Area Coach of the Year after a 22-9 season. It was Immokalee's first winning season since 2002 and more victories than the program combined to produce in the previous three seasons (18).

Crowder thought the losing streak might continue when he lost his second- and third-leading scorer in December (one for six weeks and one for the season).

"I was trying to hunt two or three wins," Crowder said. "We were like 9-3 and my goal was a .500 record after eight straight losing seasons here."

Crowder tweaked the offense considerably, and the players – as they've done from Arizona to Savannah – ate up Crowder's craving for victories. Crowder even got away from an offense that's been helping him win since before he beat a Paul Westphal-coached team en route to a national small college title at Bristol College in 1985.

"Instead of running that wheel and motion and everything I've run for years, we picked-and-rolled to death," said Crowder, who started on Elvin Little's 1976 state tournament team at Science Hill.

Point guard Jernell Hughes and Xavier Richardson executed with precision while teammates remembered their roles.

"We went to almost an NBA-style offense and just picked and rolled, because nobody could out-jump (Richardson), and my point guard (Hughes) was so quick and could take the ball to the rack so well," said Crowder, who played two years at Wofford before transferring to Milligan and averaging



Brien Crowder

around 16 points per game during two seasons for Phil Worrell. "Hughes ended up averaging about 25 points per game. They'd box him and this, that and the other. ...

"Richardson had 75 catches in football. He's a Division I football receiver. He may be Division I in basketball too, because he reminds you of Dominique Wilkins."

Crowder won a 3A state championship in Arizona (1996-97), where he also one a regional postseason junior-college tournament at Northland Pioneer. More recently, he turned around Rhea County (90 victories in four seasons) and Antioch, where he won 50 games in two seasons, went to the state tournament and finished runner-up at the Arby's Classic in 2006.

Crowder began his career coaching at the Boys Club and in the Johnson City Parks & Rec programs. He coached at North Side elementary school and coached Derrick and Mikey Bristol at

Stratton elementary.

These days he has Immokalee alumnus/former NFL star Edgerrin James on board.

"He really gave me a nice compliment in front of people when I walked out in the hall (this season)," Crowder said. "He said 'Here's the man who's gonna try to take us to the top.'"

Crowder believes his rapport with players is natural because he's a kid/hoops junkie at heart, and because he will let the best players play regardless of extenuating pressures. He talks about winning with all-Caucasian teams, All-African American rosters, Hispanics, Native Americans and a shooting guard from Kurdistan.

"I never looked at color of skin or who somebody's daddy was," Crowder said. "I play the best players. ... The bottom line is how can they fit into my system and will they do what I ask them to do."

Crowder won \$234,000 on "Deal or No Deal" and laughs talking while talking about having a pool.

"Come on, man, the only pool we had

growing up was one of those you blew up," he said.

Indeed, he hasn't forgotten his roots. Crowder remembers getting excited to take a pop bottle to the service station, which earned him 10 cents to buy crumbs at the Long John Silvers where Mama Mia's Pizza has long since moved.

"I grew up at 109 Chilhowie, right across from the Stewart family," Crowder said. "They tore our house down and put up a duplex or something there. I lived four houses and a service station from North Side School. ...

"I remember that North Side Cowboys blue. Tommy Thomas was my fifth-grade coach."

Crowder fires out names such as David Daniels, Charlie Bailey, Gary Scheuerman, Dennis Greenwell, Little and Worrell while discussing coaching influences.

"I had coaches that I'd run out in front of a dump truck and take charge for just because I thought the world of them," Crowder said. "I always wanted to coach, and I'm blessed to be able to do what I love."