

The Miracle Worker

A low-key coach is quietly leading Montevallo to basketball dominance.

BY THIS TIME OF YEAR, football begins to wind down and sports fans' thoughts turn to basketball. Accordingly, a debate ensues as fans try to answer who has the best round-ball team in the state. The Crimson Tide, the Tigers and the Blazers have all had success in years past, but the most successful team in state over the last decade is located about 30 minutes south of downtown Birmingham: The University of Montevallo Falcons, led by unassuming head coach Danny Young.

The 2011-2012 season was the best in the 45-year history of Montevallo's basketball program, as the Falcons won the Peach Belt Conference and advanced through the NCAA Division II basketball to the university's first national championship game. Millions saw a talented Montevallo squad battle Western Washington on CBS, keeping pace with the Vikings for most of the game but fading in the end, 72-65. Despite the loss, the appearance in the national championship was the culmination of 10 years of hard work.

Young was hired in June 2003 to take over a basketball program in chaos. Since 1995, Montevallo had no winning seasons, and only two seasons of 10 wins or more. The hoops program hit rock bottom during the 2002 to 2003 season after winning only four games with only one player willing to return for the 2003 to 2004 season. Still, Young could see the championship potential, and after a successful season as head coach of Salem University in West Virginia, he relocated to Montevallo.

"I was really impressed with the school when I pulled up that first day. Our campus is just so beautiful with the white pillars and the bricks and the trees," says Young from his second-floor office in the University's athletic complex, the Student Activity Center, nicknamed The SAC.

Before settling in Pelham with his wife Sarina and children, Caleb, Sophia and Cole, Young played college basketball at Grand Canyon University. His head coach was Paul Westphal, a name many sports fans may recognize as the one-time head coach of the Phoenix Suns who, with Leeds native Charles Barkley, nearly toppled the Chicago Bulls in 1993. "I learned a lot playing for Paul Westphal. He was a great

"There are some exciting things going on between the community and the university. It's an exciting time to be a Falcon right now."



Coach Danny Young

players coach," Young says. "He's probably forgotten more basketball than I've ever known."

During his first year at Montevallo, Young oversaw the greatest turnaround in school history, winning 23 games — 19 more than the previous season — as the Falcons went on to win their first-ever Gulf South Conference championship and advanced to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Division II National Tournament. During his tenure at Montevallo, Young has amassed a record of 257-98 and was recently named the Gulf South Conference East Division Coach of the Decade.

Young is one of those guys who seems most at home on a basketball court or on the team bus and, like a lot of successful athletes and coaches, it's fair to say he's a touch superstitious. For instance, Young insists on eating at Mexican restaurants while the team is on the road.

Whatever his process is, it works. He's managed to recruit talented athletes to rural Shelby County, coaching many All-Americans, including Antoine Davis, one of the leaders of last year's squad despite a leg injury that sidelined him for much of the year.

One might wonder how it's possible to get great players to come to a small school like Montevallo with a student population of only 2,800 (as a comparison, Western Washington's student population is more than 18,000). "It's not a hard sell, I don't think," says Young. "You're close enough to a metropolitan area, yet you're out where it's kind of quiet and they can focus on basketball and school, and those are the two things they need to focus on first, before anything else."

Young begins his second decade at Montevallo at an interesting time. In recent years, the university has upgraded many of its facilities, including the modern SAC which replaced the aging Myrick Gymnasium eight years ago. Additionally, cooperation between the university and the city of Montevallo is at an all-time high. New brick sidewalks are being built from the campus to Orr Park near the city's downtown, and the university recently purchased the old Alabama Power building on Main Street, offering classes and other services off campus for the first time. At the center of all this excitement is a basketball team that has captured the hearts of the community and hopes to bring the first national championship to town in 2013.

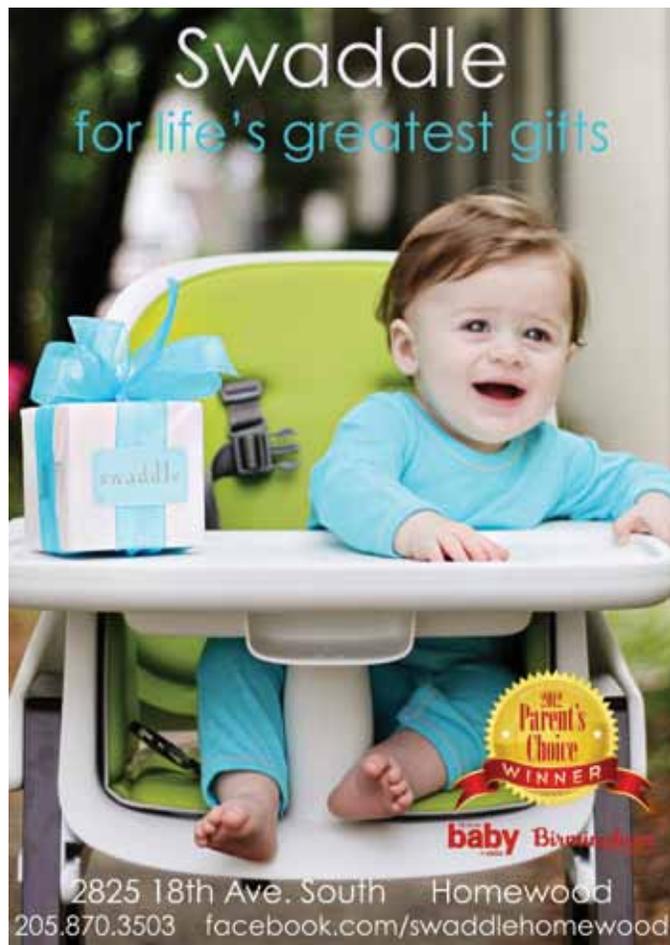
"If you win, it makes it easier for people to want to come and get excited," admits Young. "There are some exciting things going on between the community and the university. ■

Details

Visit montevallofalcons.com for a complete basketball schedule, tickets and results from this season's Montevallo games.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

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