Women’s College Basketball: John Wilson tabbed as Cabrillo’s coach

APTOS >> John Wilson, who stepped down as head coach of the Soquel High girls varsity basketball team in 2013 after nearly two decades roaming the sidelines, will take over the women’s basketball program at Cabrillo College, athletic director Dale Murray confirmed Thursday.

A longtime fixture among local basketball circles whose success at the high school level is practically unmatched within Santa Cruz County, Wilson takes over a women’s program at Cabrillo that last season was suspended due to a lack of players.

Wilson will try and revitalize the program in what will be his first collegiate coaching position.
“I’m very excited,” said Wilson, who celebrated his 51st birthday on Thursday.

“We’re ready to get rolling,” he added.

A Santa Cruz High graduate who played under legendary Cardinals coach Pete Newell Jr., Wilson spent almost a quarter of a century coaching high school girls teams at both Santa Cruz and Soquel — the latter of which he coached at for 18 years. An athletic director at Soquel for 10 of those years, Wilson remains a physical education teacher at the high school.

He will be an adjunct coach at Cabrillo.

Murray said there were a “number of applicants” for the vacant coaching position.

“And John was on top,” Murray added. “He’s a former Seahawk. He’s local. He knows all the coaches. He knows the players. He knows the players’ parents, and he was very successful coaching locally.

“He is an ideal candidate to get us started again.”

Cabrillo had just six players on its roster last year when the decision to curb the 2014-15 campaign was made on Sept. 15 — two days after a midnight deadline for students to enroll for the fall semester. Kristy Netto, who coached the Seahawks for seven seasons, resigned from her seasonal adjunct position as a result shortly thereafter.

Murray said it was always the school’s intention to bring the program back.

“And we did,” he added.

Low numbers had been problem at Cabrillo the previous three seasons, though, usually a result of injuries and both work and school commitments. Two years ago, the team finished with eight players on its roster and compiled a 7-17 overall mark, 5-7 in the Coast Conference.

Wilson said his first goal at Cabrillo is to generate interest, by contacting players locally and reaching out to players regionally who might want to come to Cabrillo. He said he knows it has been hard in the past, and he knows the reasons why girls might not continue playing basketball after high school are many.

But he’s hopeful of change.

“We’re just trying to do everything we can, to let people know that we’re starting up again,” Wilson said. “We’re really excited about it as a coaching staff and we’re trying to generate that excitement to the players we’re talking to and anyone who might come out for the team.”

Wilson hopes to add Mark Marengo, Courtney Good and Cristina Locatelli to his coaching staff. Marengo helped coach the defense for Wilson while at Soquel, while Good is a former player of
his who graduated in 2004 and coached at the collegiate level in New Mexico. Locatelli is another former player of Wilson’s who previously played at Cabrillo.

“I’m trying to surround myself — and I have surrounded myself — with great people and great coaches,” Wilson said.

A six-time Coach of the Year recipient in the Santa Cruz Coast Athletic League, Wilson boasts a lengthy list of accomplishments of his own from his time at both Santa Cruz and Soquel, where he helped turn the Knights into one of the more storied girls hoops programs in Santa Cruz County.

Wilson has compiled 10 SCCAL titles, 20 Central Coast Section appearances and four NorCal regional playoff appearances. In 2012, his penultimate season at Soquel, he led the Knights to their first CCS championship in program history and a 25-5 overall record.

“I think he’s going to do great,” said Natalie Diaz, a senior at Soquel who played under Wilson during her freshman and sophomore seasons. Diaz, who won the league’s MVP award her sophomore year, will compete at Dominican University in San Rafael next year.

“He’s already shown he wants to put the work in,” said Diaz, noting that Wilson was in attendance during last week’s North-South High School All-Star Basketball Classic in Salinas, a showcase game for the top senior basketball players from Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey counties. “He’s really getting into it. I think after that two-year break from coaching, I think he’s ready for Cabrillo, for sure.”

Stepping away from the sidelines the last two seasons allowed Wilson to see if he still had the passion to coach.

“And I realized that, hey, I want to do it,” he said. “And with Cabrillo, it’s something I’m honored to do ... a challenging experience.”

“I think he’ll do great. He’s a master of fundamentals,” said coach Kanani Thomas, who took over the Soquel program from Wilson beginning in the 2013-14 season. A 2006 graduate of Soquel, Thomas played three seasons under Wilson and was later his assistant coach for two seasons.

Thomas was part of both the ’04 and ’06 Knights teams that reached the CCS finals, and assisted him during the 2011-12 and 2012-13 campaigns.

“Obviously, he was coached by Pete Newell Jr. and that trickled into what we were doing,” Thomas said. “We were shooting everyday, dribbling everyday, and he’ll bring that to the college level.”

Thomas said Wilson also brings great energy to practice. She remembers playing “cutthroat” — a 3-on-3 basketball drill — opposite Wilson in practices.
“And I just remember him having so much fun,” Thomas recalled. “To teach the fundamentals of the game but also have fun while you’re doing it ... the girls will be really lucky to have him.