

Denver East's Rudy Carey nears win No. 800, with his son and star players propelling the Angels on another title push

The Angels are 9-1 and have not lost to a Colorado opponent heading into Friday's home showdown against No. 4 Chaparral

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PUBLISHED: January 4, 2018 at 4:43 pm | UPDATED: January 4, 2018 at 6:52 pm

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To build a prep basketball legacy is one matter. To maintain it — and to polish it off with another state championship — is another task altogether.

Such is the situation facing Denver East's Rudy Carey, who at 65 is in the twilight of his coaching career. Carey's won nine state titles over 42 years, and he has the tools this season to earn a record 10th — not to mention break the 800-win mark should the No. 2 ranked Angels continue at their current 9-1 pace.

The Class 5A boys basketball career leader in wins, state titles, and state titles at one school (six with the Angels) said he assesses his coaching status on a "year-by-year basis", although this season looks as promising as ever for Denver East to wrap up his career with another state title.

"It's getting down to my dad's last few years, and it feels like time is running out," explained his son, David, Denver East assistant coach. "Even with all our talent, we have to do all the little things right and we have to have a sense of urgency.

"This is like a family business for us — so we want to make sure the business is being run the right way, and that he goes out the right way."

Business has been booming this winter. The Angels head into Friday's showdown against No. 4 Chaparral coming off a runner-up finish at the prestigious Tarkanian Classic in Las Vegas, and have not lost to an in-state opponent. And while Rudy Carey is still the program's front man — yelling, pacing the bench, working the officials — outside of game day, it's David who's fueling the hopes of Denver East's first gold ball since 2014.

David Carey, who won over 100 games as the head coach of Montbello from 2005-11, is the one who directs practices. His energy, funneled into the development of two of the state's top players in senior guard Daylen Kountz (21.9 points per game) and junior guard Kwane Marble (16.5) as well as a strong supporting cast, has the elder Carey confident his team can build off last season's Sweet 16 loss to eventual champion Eaglecrest.

"We were young, immature and inexperienced last year, and we ran up against a team that was very seasoned," Rudy Carey said. "(Coach) John Olander did a tremendous job with getting those kids to peak at the right time — there's no substitute for the experience of three straight semifinals — but this year, we have the potential to match that experience and result."

In Kountz, a CU commit, Rudy Carey believes he has "the best player in the state, and it's not even close."

"Daylen is, in my estimation, one of the top 10 players in the state in the last 20 years," Rudy said. "He's compromised some of his scoring to do other things — rebounding, blocking shots, defending — and offensively he's got what you call a 14-foot game, which is a lost art among high school players."

But while Kountz and Marble (who has received three Division I offers to date) remain centerpieces from last year's team, much else changed. Most notably, Denver East had three players on its roster at 6-foot-6 or taller, including a 7-foot-1 giant, but all those players have either graduated or transferred. The Angels now roll out a starting lineup that runs about 6-foot-3 across the board.

"To make up for size disadvantages, it's about getting everyone on the same page, keeping our energy up on defense and making sure we're doing the little things — communicating, getting loose balls, running the floor," Kountz said. "We don't have the big man that we did last year, so Kwane and I both have to make sure we're bought into every defensive possession against those post players."

And in a parity-laden Class 5A where there's anywhere from 5 to 10 teams with a realistic shot at winning state, David Carey emphasized that "removing egos" is essential in order for Denver East to achieve its potential.

It's Rudy's legacy in the balance, but the team's individuals are in charge of the outcome — as they always have been in what the Angels Hall of Famer described as "not a program, but a culture".

"It's a student-driven basketball team — it's their buy-in that's going to get us to where we want to go," Rudy said. "And honestly, I'm just enjoying the ride this year. This is a motivated group."

Denver East 4-1-1

Starters: Jr. G Clayton Finley-Ponds, Sr. G Chase Neagle, Sr. G Ja'shawn Chisel, Sr. PG Daylen Kountz, Sr. PG Kwane Marble.

Key reserves. Sr. G Kaelan Potts, Jr. G Charles Young

Key games remaining: Friday vs. No. 4 Chaparral, 7 p.m.; 1/22 at Eaglecrest, 7 p.m.; 1/26 vs. Thomas Jefferson, 5:30 p.m. Thunderdome; 1/27 vs. Far Northeast, 1 p.m. Thunderdome; 2/2 vs. Lincoln, 5:30 p.m.; 2/17 vs. George Washington 1 p.m. Thunderdome.

Rudy Carey wins tracker: With 13 regular season games remaining, plus up to five playoff games, Rudy Carey (786-198) can get win No. 800 as early as Angels' first playoff game; the CHSAA career wins leader is Dick Katte, Denver Christian (876, 1964-12).

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