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Carrollton Honored At Girls Basketball Finals In Legends Program

EAST LANSING, Mich. – Nov. 26 – Carrollton High School's 1979, 1981 and 1982 girls basketball teams, which won the Class C title in the Michigan High School Athletic Association tournament in each of those years, will be honored through the Association's "Legends Of The Games" program at ceremonies at halftime of the Class C championship game of the 2002 Girls Basketball Finals at Rose Arena in Mt. Pleasant on December 7. The Class C game begins at 5 p.m. (EST).

In its sixth year, the Legends program promotes educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years. At least 13 members of those teams are expected to be in attendance to receive commemorative plaques and a banner to display at the school during the ceremony.

(The story that follows was written by MHSAA Historian Ron Pesch of Muskegon, for this year's MHSAA Girls Basketball Finals Souvenir Program)

For years, Carrollton High School had fought for its own identity. The high school was often referred to as Saginaw Carrollton, but graduates are quick to point out that the school resides outside the city. Or as Vonnie Thompson, a sleek 5-7 all-state guard for the Cavaliers and later a basketball standout at the University of Michigan, stated some 20 years ago: "We are not outside Saginaw. Saginaw is outside us."

Thompson and her peers did more than a band of high-priced, big-city image consultants ever could do to establish the school's image. Three MHSAA championships in a span of four years can alter the landscape. Suddenly, everybody knows your name.

The rise to the top of the Class C girls basketball ranks began in the fall of 1976. Coached by Gary Zimmerman, the team won the first of seven District titles in a row. A sudden run to the MHSAA Final in 1977 was unexpected, as a young Cavalier squad eventually lost to DeWitt, but Carrollton emerged as a team to be reckoned with. The Cavaliers returned to the final round again in 1978, falling to eventual champ Allen Park Cabrini in the Quarterfinals.

That tournament experience was invaluable for Zimmerman's squad heading into 1979. The team featured a balanced scoring attack and solid defense, and sported an undefeated record when the postseason started. The run through the tourney was storybook-like, capped by a 50-31 win over Royal Oak Shrine in

(more)

2-2-2 – Carrollton Honored In Legends Program

the title game as Carrollton finished 28-0. Sharon Sawyers notched 15 points while Laura Collison ended with 14 and Lori Gnatkowski (later a star at the University of Michigan, establishing longstanding career marks in assists and steals) added 13 for the Cavaliers. All three had been members of the 1977 team. Defensively, they contained Rachelle Bostic, one of the state's top players, limiting her to 14 points.

While the team graduated four of its five starters following the season, the Carrollton bench cradled the seeds for another outstanding run. However, the veteran coach would not be along for the ride. The team won another District crown in 1980, but Zimmerman stepped aside following the season. Bill DeLong took the reigns in 1981, and inherited a talent-laden group on the brink of domination in Class C. Four starters – Vonnie Thompson, Kelly Burns, Kelly Maturen, and Laura Goodwin – were on the roster in 1979 championship season. Still, the Cavaliers needed to gel as a team.

While the team dropped its season opener to Class A power Midland, it rebounded with 16 straight victories before tournament play. Carrollton cruised through the District, and routed once-beaten Unionville-Sebewaing in the Regional Final, 70-40. Thompson, suffering from an ankle injury sustained five days before the start of Districts, returned to the lineup in that contest, providing leadership and 15 points to spark the Cavaliers into a spot in the Class C Quarterfinals for the fourth time in five years.

Awaiting the team was unbeaten and top-ranked Redford St. Agatha. Carrollton, ranked No. 2 in the polls, dismantled the opponent, 64-40, shooting a blistering 58 from the floor in the final three quarters of play after trailing 13-12 at the end of the first frame. Sophomore Sue Mayes pumped in 18 points, including six in the opening quarter. According to DeLong, it was the team's best performance on the year.

With a 47-37 win in the Semifinals against Caledonia, Carrollton headed to the Finals. Ironically, the Cavs would face Addison, the same school they had defeated in the 1979 Semifinals. Unbeaten on the year, the Panthers were led by 6-4 center Sandy Parker and 5-4 guard Lorri Vettes. DeLong assigned Mayes to handle Vettes.

“I usually put Vonnie on the other team's best girl,” DeLong told the coach in the Saginaw News, “but I used Sue this game because of her long arms and quickness.”

Addison jumped out to a 14-11 lead after a period of play. Maturen contributed seven of the Carrollton's 11 points, keeping them in the game. The Cavs pulled to within one on numerous occasions in the second quarter before finally taking the lead on a pair of free throws by Burns at the 2:12 mark. The Panthers moved to a four-corner spread in an attempt to open the middle for Vettes, but could not get Carrollton out of its zone. The Cavaliers responded by busting open a 10-point lead at the end of three quarters, 40-30, and cruised to their second title in three years, 53-46. The five starters went the distance,

(more)

3-3-3 – Carrollton Honored In Legends Program

with Thompson leading the champions with 17 points. Senior Burns added 15, while classmate Goodwin, who had missed the Semifinals because of a concussion suffered in the St. Agatha game, grabbed a game-high 12 rebounds.

The team's success brought new pressure in 1982. With three returning starters in the lineup, Carrollton's experience was expected to carry the team far.

Indeed, in the regular season, the Cavaliers dropped only two contests and earned a No. 2 ranking in the polls. Again, they rolled through the Districts.

The first real test came in the Regionals against familiar foe Unionville-Sebewaing. Top-ranked in the Class C polls, USA was still smarting from the 30-point thumping it took in the previous year's Regional.

Facing perhaps the principal roadblock to repeating, Carrollton appeared to have the upper hand for most of the game. Entering the intermission with a 23-15 lead, USA outscored Carrollton, 17-14, in the third, but DeLong's squad bounced back and opened a 12-point lead in the final stanza. The Patriots rallied to pull within three points with 11 seconds to play, 53-50. After the Cavs missed on the front end of a one-and-one situation from the foul line, USA all-stater Dawn Englehardt scored with two seconds remaining, but time ran out following the exchange, allowing Carrollton to escape with a 53-52 win and advance to the Regional Final against Flint Academy.

Junior Sue Mayes scorched the net for 23 points, grabbed nine rebounds and had nine steals as Carrollton topped Academy, 58-34, for another trip to the Quarterfinals. DeLong had the chance to go to his bench in the Quarterfinal game, as his team opened up a 37-10 halftime lead over Detroit Holy Redeemer, en route to a 61-30 win. Mayes scored 17 points while seniors Dawn Fleischner and Marianne Lamia chipped in with 10 and six points, respectively.

“Our goal is the Finals again,” DeLong said afterward. “We've got a bunch of seniors who are playing for the last time. We just have to keep hustling and playing good defense.”

The battle with Homer in the Semifinals proved to be far more challenging. After opening up a 16-6 first-quarter lead, the Cavaliers found themselves in a battle of survival. Homer scored the first eight points of the second quarter to cut the gap to 16-14. The struggle continued throughout the remainder of the contest, and with two minutes to play, the teams were knotted at 34-34. However, Carrollton was able to take advantage of a series of Homer turnovers, and went on an 11-0 run to earn a return ticket to the Final.

To some degree, the championship game with White Cloud was anticlimactic. Carrollton again focused on defense, as Marcie Weigandt and Tammy Wallschlager worked underneath to shutdown the Indians' height advantage. After building a 30-10 lead at intermission, the Cavaliers were able to relax.

(more)

4-4-4 – Carrollton Honored In Legends Program

Mayes finished with 18 points while Lamia added 12 as Carrollton blazed their way to an easy 60-32 victory.

“I guess it's more of relief than joy to win it this year,” said Thompson, who finished her career with 22 points and six assists, in the Detroit Free Press. “The pressure was always there this year to come out and do it again. This was my last game ever here and I wanted to make it a good one. We also wanted to win it for (DeLong).”

For the coach, it was an amazing run – two titles in his first two years as head coach. The margin of victory in the Final offered him the chance to substitute freely, providing memories to last a lifetime for many, including senior Kelli Manry. Unique in the sense she was born with a partial left arm, Kelli was never a regular in the lineup, but spent every practice striving for the ultimate goal. Those few minutes of game time made all the effort worthwhile.

“I'll always remember the state championships,” she said, “especially this one because I got to play.

The MHSAA is a private, not-for-profit corporation of voluntary membership by over 1,300 public and private senior high schools and junior high/middle schools which exists to develop common rules for athletic eligibility and competition. No government funds or tax dollars support the MHSAA, which was the first such association nationally to not accept membership dues or tournament entry fees from schools. Member schools which enforce these rules are permitted to participate in MHSAA tournaments, which attract approximately 1.6 million spectators each year.

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