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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 26, 2003

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Inaugural MHSAA Tournament Champions Honored At Girls Basketball Finals In Legends Program

EAST LANSING, Mich. – Nov. 26 – To celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Michigan High School Athletic Association's inaugural Girls Basketball Tournament, the MHSAA will honor all four of its very first champions through the Association's "Legends Of The Games" program at ceremonies during halftime of the Class C championship game of the 2003 Girls Basketball Finals at Rose Arena in Mt. Pleasant on December 6. The Class C game begins at 5 p.m. (EST).

Champions from the initial December 1973 tournament include: Detroit Dominican in Class A; Hudsonville Unity Christian in Class B; Hamtramck St. Ladislaus in Class C; and Ewen-Trout Creek in Class D. Detroit Catholic League powers Detroit Dominican and Hamtramck St. Ladislaus repeated as champions in 1974 and will also be honored during the program.

In its seventh year, the Legends program promotes educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years. At least 28 members of those teams are expected to be in attendance to receive commemorative plaques 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.)

In an effort to promote educational athletics by showcasing some of the great teams of past years, the Michigan High School Athletic Association instituted a program called "Legends Of The Games" in 1997. This year, champions from each Class of the first-ever MHSAA Girls Basketball tournament will be honored halftime of the Class C Final.

They can't be called pioneers or trailblazers because girls certainly had played basketball before them. In fact, the sport dates back to 1898 in Michigan and it is even believed the girls game predates the boys at the high school level in the Great Lakes state. Perhaps trendsetters is a better term: a group that changes the perceptions of something old into something popular, fresh, stylish and hot.

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2-2-2 – Inaugural Champs Honored In Legends Program

The Class of 1973 took an opportunity not previously available to their predecessors and they ran with it. Thirty years later, they are being recognized with a truly appropriate honor as MHSAA “Legends of the Game.”

Girls basketball remained popular well into the 1920s. However, the Great Depression forced schools across Michigan to cut sports programs to the bone. In many places, the athletic opportunities for females never rebounded. In 1966, the MHSAA formed the Girls Athletics Committee to look at the growth in girls high school sports in Michigan and across America. The group held its first meeting that October to craft guidelines for schools who offered or planned to offer girls athletic programs. For many coaches it signified the start on the long road back.

A special 15-member committee comprised of 12 girls basketball coaches and three high school principals drew up plans for a three-week tournament divided into four classes styled after the boys tournament.

Instead of six-member teams (with three players on offense and three on defense) traditionally used by the girls in years previous, the committee called for five-member squads with rules that closely paralleled the boys' game. MHSAA member schools selected a December tournament date, and a field of 629 schools planned to participate in the event. Only two years previous, slightly more than 300 schools had girls teams. On December 15, eight high school teams gathered at four different sites around the state to compete for the first MHSAA basketball championships. Everyone involved dreamed that the recognition would ultimately lead to acceptance as girls as athletes and open up additional possibilities for the participants.

Not surprisingly, the field of the first championship games was dominated by parochial schools, where the game had continued to be played on a regular basis. In Detroit, for example, the Catholic Youth Organization had well-established programs for young ladies, and the group provided an excellent feeder system to the large number of parochial schools in the metro area.

In the first MHSAA Class A Final, hosted at Grand Blanc High School, Detroit Dominican topped Grand Rapids Christian, 70-43. Sensational outside shooting by Dominican's 5-5 senior guard Melanie Megge and teammate Lynne Chadwick led Dominican to the crown. Members of the East Division of the tough Detroit Catholic League, Dominican earned back-to-back league titles in 1971 and 1972. Megge hit 16 of her game-high 38 points in the final eight minutes of the contest. Teammate Chadwick scored 16 points, many from deep in the corner, helping to break up a tight defensive battle. The game was played before 645

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3-3-3 -- Inaugural Champs Honored In Legends Program

fans. Interestingly, Dominican rallied for 44 second-half points to defeat another East division member, Farmington Our Lady of Mercy, 60-50, in the Semifinals for the rights to advance to the title game.

In Class B, Hudsonville Unity Christian jumped out to a 33-30 halftime lead, then fought off an intense Saginaw MacArthur press to snag a 49-45 victory in a game played at East Kentwood High School before a crowd of nearly 1,000. In this battle of HUC size versus Saginaw quickness, Cindy Masselink and Deb Aukeman emerged with 17 and 16 points, respectively, to lead the Crusaders. Masselink tallied four quick points to start the final quarter, giving the Crusaders a 43-35 lead. A lay-up by Kim Hansen and a pair of free throws by Marcia Visser upped the margin to a commanding 12-point lead.

The Class C Final saw center Linda Balabuch scored 27 points, and guard Donna Travis net 24 as Hamtramck St. Ladislaus defeated Blissfield, 67-43, before 350 in the crowd at Owosso High School. The Lassies, defeated once during the year by Detroit Dominican, were also members of the East Division of the Detroit Catholic League. St. Ladislaus opened up a 14-0 lead in the first four minutes, held a 29-17 advantage at the half, and never looked back.

“It's the greatest thrill of my coaching career and just a magnificent thing for the girls,” stated St. Ladislaus coach Gloria Soluk. “It was really exciting to visit the different towns, staying overnight and living together as a team.”

For the Ewen-Trout Creek squad, a trip to the Class D Finals meant a 600-mile road trip from the Upper Peninsula to Alma High School. Trailing 13-6 in the first quarter, ETC shifted to a full-court press and rolled to a 57-48 win over North Muskegon to become the MHSAA's first Class D champ. North Muskegon, pulled within four with a minute-and-a-half to play, but Ewen-Trout Creek held off the surge for the win. Sandy Lannet led the winners with 17 points and 14 rebounds, while teammate Jamie Fleming added 14 points and 16 boards. Linda Kariainen and Sandy Manning added 13 and 12 points, respectively, for the U.P. squad.

One of the more unique features of the 1973 MHSAA tournament was that it allowed flexibility in scheduling that first year. In the case of both Detroit parochial schools, their seasons were only partially complete at the time they won MHSAA titles. The teams still had half a season to play as the Detroit Catholic league elected not to begin regular-season play until November. In the case of Dominican, the team had a perfect 11-0 mark through MHSAA tournament play, and ended the season with a 20-2 record. St. Ladislaus cruised through the rest of the season undefeated, and added the Catholic League championship later in the season.

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4-4-4 -- Inaugural Champs Honored In Legends Program

Two of the four squads repeated as champions one year later. The following fall, despite losing Megge, center Paulette Hendricks and guard Mary Jo Fisher to graduation, Dominican grabbed its second consecutive Class A title with a thrilling 59-58 win over league rival Farmington Our Lady of Mercy. The MHSAA Final was the season's fourth meeting between the two Detroit-area all-girls schools. Dominican trailed in the series, two games to one, as the squads squared off in the title game before 1,700 fans at East Kentwood High School. The teams split in the regular season, then Mercy ousted Dominican in the semifinals of the Detroit Catholic League playoffs.

In the MHSAA championship game, Dominican led, 41-37, at the end of three periods of play, but found itself trailing by four points with 3:20 left. Dominican rallied to within a point, 56-55, with 52 seconds to play on a pair of free throws by 5-4 freshman guard Betsy Essian. Judy Lennard, who scored 12 points in the last half, gave the defending champs a slim one-point lead, 57-56, with a field goal 13 seconds later, then Essian capped the win with two more free throws with six seconds left. Chadwick led the Dominican attack with 14 points and 10 rebounds, while Nancy Hannenberg came off the bench to score 10 point in the second half.

St. Ladislaus extended its winning streak to 42 straight (including regular-season victories over both Class A finalists, Detroit Dominican and Farmington Our Lady of Mercy) and earned its second consecutive Class C crown with a 59-45 win over Ontonagon in 1974 before 2,400 fans at East Kentwood High School. St. Ladislaus found little challenge in the championship game, as the Lassies opened up a 22-0 lead before Ontonagon got on the board. Linda Balabuch led the winners with 28 points. Donna Travis, who scored 30 points in the team's 84-58 semifinal win over Mason County Central, finished with 13 in the title game. Few on those first teams could have anticipated the growth of the sport over the last 30 years. As an example, the MHSAA Girls Basketball tournament topped the 200,000 mark in attendance for the second time during the 2002 season. The three-week total spectatorship of 205,322 surpassed the 1999-00 mark of 203,411. At District tournaments alone, the 142,833 fans in attendance broke the old record of 125,449 set in 1999-00.

In the six years the Semifinals and Finals have taken place in Mt. Pleasant, the girls tournament has enjoyed record crowds for single sessions and all sessions, and topped with a three-day record of 21,606 fans in 1999.

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5-5-5 -- Inaugural Champs Honored In Legends Program

Girls basketball has enjoyed immense growth in the past 30 years, and those in attendance from the inaugural championship teams in 1973 can be proud of what they started.

Expected to be in attendance for the awards ceremony are (list accurate as of November 26):

DETROIT DOMINICAN

Head Coach Sue (Kruszewski) Hardy
Mary (Barkume) Marchese
Jean (Cavedoni) Hensick
Lynne Chadwick
Betsy (Essian) Abro
Paulette (Hendricks) Trask
Judy (Lennard) Kelp
Janet Nicoll
Becky (Riendeau) Bueche
Carolyn Romzick
Sharon (Semany) Baksa
Ellen Slezak

HUDSONVILLE UNITY CHRISTIAN

Deb (Aukeman) Lenhart
Marlys (DeWitt) Popma
Kim Hansen
Mary (Hoezee) VanderZwaag
Cindy (Masselink) DeYoung
Linda (VanDyke) Jager
Marcia (Visser) Beutel

HAMTRAMCK ST. LADISLAUS

Patricia Bobryk
Karen (Skawski) DeLuca
Kim (Skawski) Kulaga
Linda (Skawski) Martin
Donna (Travis) Meier

EWEN-TROUT CREEK

Carrie (George) Hampston
Sandy (Lannet) Avedsian
Sandy Manning
Theresa (Wolfe) Harvey