



michigan high school athletic association

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DeWitt, Mid Peninsula Celebrated As 30-Year Legends At Girls Basketball Finals

EAST LANSING, Mich. – March 4 – *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, the 1977-78 MHSAA Girls Basketball championship teams from DeWitt (Class C) and Rock Mid Peninsula (Class D) at halftime of the Class C Girls Basketball Final on Saturday at the Convocation Center in Ypsilanti. Eighteen members of those teams will be in attendance.*

The text that follows was written by MHSAA historian Ron Pesch of Muskegon for the souvenir program for this year’s Girls Basketball Finals:

Con-sol-i-da-tion: the combination of scattered material into a single unit.

The definition is an appropriate one for the 1977-78 MHSAA Girls Basketball championship squads from both DeWitt and Rock Mid-Peninsula High Schools.

At DeWitt, Coach Chris Kane merged the scattered talents of her squad into a single cohesive and interchangeable unit, capable of playing with the best the state had to offer regardless of school size. Speed, conditioning and teamwork were the team’s attributes.

The Class C Panthers racked up 21 straight victories to finish the season at 24-2. Their only losses came against Class A powerhouse Lansing Everett, led by Evelyn Johnson – sister of Earvin “Magic” Johnson – and Okemos, the runner-up for the Class B title that year.

“We have a number of girls who can score,” stated Kane at the time, “and, if one of them is off, somebody else always seems to pick up the pace.”

That ability became most apparent in the final rounds of the tournament.

Nancy Garland, a feisty 5-5 forward, posted a team-high 22 points in the Quarterfinals against Kent City. The quickest player on the floor, the senior nailed a pair of jump shots and a free throw to kick-start a 15-point run in the final moments of the fourth quarter of the contest. Leading 51-49 with four minutes to play in the contest, the Panthers roared to a 68-51 win. Sophomore center Kelley Robinson added 21 points and 17 rebounds in the contest.

Seniors Cindy White, the team’s other forward, and guard Sue Elkins paced the Panthers as DeWitt crushed previously unbeaten Buchanan in the Class C Semifinals at Lansing Waverly, 73-41. White scored 20, while Elkins added 18 in the win. Beth Willard ran the offense flawlessly, dishing out passes to her teammates while adding four points.

White fouled out early in the third quarter of the MHSAA championship game against Saginaw Carrollton. DeWitt used its team speed and versatility to overcome a disadvantage in height en route to a 51-36 victory at Michigan State’s Jenison Fieldhouse in East Lansing. Senior Sue Noch scored the opening basket and finished with 10 points. Robinson again led the team in scoring with 21, including 9-of-12 from the free-throw line.

“They had a definite height advantage, and we had trouble shooting over them,” said Kane. “We felt we had to make them work on offense and defense, so we pressed them on defense and we hustled the ball around on offense to make them work. Their larger players are not as quick, and they tire easier.”

The memories of the title run still reverberate 30 years later.

“I remember how hard my players worked on defense, and how unselfish they were as a team,” said Kane. “Each player had one goal in mind – to win the state championship.”

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2-2-2 – Legends Of The Games

“Most of us had been playing together since 8th grade,” recalled White. “We never lost a home game.”

“So many from our community (were) there to support us,” added Willard. “This was before DeWitt was an ‘In’ place to live.”

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At Mid-Peninsula, consolidation had added meaning. One year previous, the school had not existed. Following the 1976-77 school year, the school districts in the Upper Peninsula’s small towns of Perkins and Rock merged to form Mid-Peninsula. ‘Little Giants’ and ‘Yellow Jackets’ joined hands to become ‘Wolverines.’

Perkins coach Debbie DeBacker led the program at the consolidated school. Entering her fifth season as a varsity coach, DeBacker had joined the profession without having played the game herself. Gwinn High School did not have a girls basketball team during her high school years and she did not play the game during her years at Northern Michigan University. Instead, she learned the game by reading books and attending coaching camps hosted by coaching legends like John Wooden and Bobby Knight.

Like many consolidations, the Rock-Perkins merger initially met with some resistance within the communities. Separated by a mere eight miles on M-35, the schools were true rivals with long and proud athletic histories dating to the 1920s.

While the girls game was only in its infancy in the area, DeBacker’s Perkins team advanced to the Semifinals in 1975. In 1976, the Perkins girls defeated Rock by a single point before advancing to the Final and ending the year as runner-up for the Class D crown.

“There was talent from both communities,” recalled DeBacker about that first season competing as Mid-Peninsula. “That helped (with the transition). Our season was tremendous, and it gave the Rock and Perkins fans a common bond.”

The starting roster for the newly created school included Lynnette Royer, Lisa Carlson and Karen Miller from Perkins. They were joined by Brenda Beauchamp and Debbie Pelto from Rock.

The team cruised through the regular season with only two defeats and rolled through District and Regional play.

For the Quarterfinals, the school closed at Noon, giving fans the chance to get to Cheboygan in time for the team’s battle with Central Lake. A 5-3 guard, Royer scored 18 points while Pelto chipped in with 16 and senior Lisa Carlton added 14 in a 61-34 victory. Brenda Beauchamp pulled down 17 rebounds.

Friday’s Semifinal at DeWitt High School matched the Wolverines against Detroit St. Martin dePorres, the team most expected to win the title. Trailing 41-39 as the teams entered the final frame, Mid-Peninsula shut down the potent Eagles offense, outscoring dePorres, 13-4, for a 50-43 win. Carlson led the attack with 18 points. DePorres, which finished the season 19-2, had pounded Saginaw Michigan Lutheran Seminary in the Quarterfinals, 68-28. Suddenly, the Class D title was up for grabs.

The move of the Finals from East Kentwood the year before to Jenison Fieldhouse was dramatic, and left quite the impression on Royer.

“I remember all the fans when we walked in. The Fieldhouse was huge. Coming from a small town, I was just in awe. We were playing at a college that most of us had never dreamed of going to.”

Royer hit eight of her first 12 shots as Mid-Peninsula grabbed a 29-13 lead at the half in the title game with North Adams. The senior guard finished with 24 points in a 56-40 win, upping her varsity career total to 1,469. Carlson scored 14 points while Pelto added six.

Time, of course, has a funny way of placing the events of life into proper perspective.

For LuLu Dunlop, the memories include the innocence of the team.

“We truly didn’t understand what we had done,” stated Dunlop, who rotated playing time with Beauchamp. “We were just playing the game we loved. We just wanted to have fun.

“I remember thinking at the time that it seemed like the parents were being crabby. For them it was so serious. ‘Get to bed.’ ‘Get your rest.’ It was something at a higher level for the adults.

(more)

3-3-3 – Legends Of The Games

“Then the little kids came up to us and wanted our autographs. It was the oddest thing.

“We didn’t understand. We were just playing basketball.”

The return trip to the Upper Peninsula was filled with more surprises. At the Mackinaw Bridge, they were greeted by a “Congratulations State Champs” message on the structure’s marquee. The team arrived home to a blizzard and a waiting motorcade to guide the girls into town.

“An uncle of one of the team members had volunteered to take us down there in a motor home,” remembered Royer. “That was nice. About an hour from town, all these cars started pulling in behind us.”

“At first we weren’t sure what was going on,” said Dunlop. “All the lights and sirens...at first we didn’t realize what was happening. We really weren’t expecting it. We were just kids.”

“It was really nice to see,” said Royer. “In town, there were signs in the yards. Everyone had come together. The friction (about the merger)...it was gone.

“We made it to the Finals a year before, but I don’t think we would have made it back without the gals from Rock. They made our team stronger. Our bench was deeper. We depended on them.

“At Perkins, we had a taste of it the year before. We wanted to go back. We talked to the girls from Rock about our experience, and I think that gave them a little hunger to get there.”

“It was a jumping-off point for the team, and we had a great run for at least the next 20 years,” recalled DeBacker, who would lead the program to a 339-141 record over a 33-year career. “That state title got the interest of the area’s young girls right away. That interest kept us going for many years.”

Expected to participate in Saturday’s presentation from DeWitt are (last names are from playing days): center Kim Ferguson, forward Debbie Lusty, forward Kelly Robinson, forward Nancy Garland, forward Julie Wey, forward Cindy White, guard Beth Willard, and Head Coach Chris Kane.

Expected to participate in Saturday’s presentation from Mid Peninsula are (last names are from playing days): forward Brenda Beauchamp, center Lisa Carlson, forward Jenny Jokela, guard Eydie Kausak, guard Cheryl Lauscher, forward Vickie Lippens, guard Debbie Peltó, guard Lynnette Royer, Assistant Coach Kathy Paul, Head Coach Debbie DeBacker.

The MHSAA is a private, not-for-profit corporation of voluntary membership by over 1,800 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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