

25 years later, title-run thrills remain

By Melissa Isaacson | Jan 30, 2004

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We didn't know it then, but it was in the corner of a cramped teachers lounge and later in the tiny girls' gym where our course was plotted and the journey began.

Funny that during those heady first years in which Title IX would give girls the same athletic opportunities as boys, it would take a woman who wasn't afraid to admit she needed help, and a man who so graciously and quietly gave it, to see our potential realized.

It was 1977, the first year the Illinois High School Association offered a one-class state basketball championship for girls. And in a tiny auxiliary gym in the balcony of the Niles West gymnasium, Billy Schnurr told us it was ours if we wanted it.

Considering our junior varsity team had just been given its first uniforms, which meant players no longer had to wear gym suits with red "pinnies" over them, this was, well, mind-blowing.

Schnurr was the longtime and highly respected Niles West boys coach, and having him address us at the behest of girls coach Arlene Mulder was exciting in itself. His message--there was no reason, if we worked hard enough, that we couldn't one day be the best in the state--was enough to send us charging headlong into a three-year quest that would test us in ways we never knew before.

I still have the tapes of those final three games. I imagine all of us do. They were the clunky Betamax variety given to us by the one parent who had a machine and knew how to work the timer when she left for Champaign.

And somewhere, someone, I imagine, has the tape of Johnny and Jeannie Morris reporting our return to Skokie with a police escort that Sunday morning of April 1, 1979, the newly crowned Illinois state champions.

It took us two supersectional losses after Schnurr's speech to get to that day, the day we beat a spunky junior named Jacqueline Joyner and her East St. Louis Lincoln team 63-47 in the finals.

By then we were under the tutelage of coach Gene Earl, the former sophomore boys coach who took us that final step. After 25 years, he doesn't mind revealing how it all began.

"For years when Arlene Mulder was coach, she and Billy made sure they had the same free period," Earl said. "They would go into the faculty lounge and he would coach her every day of the season. And then she would coach you."

She would come to rely on Schnurr for help during games as well, as he would give her notes suggesting things she could implement at halftime. Mulder would urge Schnurr to sit on the bench, where his input could be better utilized and appreciated.

But quietly he would wave her off, moving back behind the bleachers as we battled to the '77 and '78 supersectionals, losing to Hinsdale South and Dundee, respectively. "That was our secret, really," Schnurr said.

Even as she became a coach and first-class motivator in her own right, Mulder would encourage and accept input from anyone, including the man who would soon replace her.

"One night while I was still coaching the sophomore boys I saw one of the girls doing something wrong, and I corrected her," Earl recalled. "Arlene came up to me and said, 'Any time you see anything wrong, please do that. I'm not proud.'"

But, oh, how she was, with a dress code that required us to look like girls and the implicit pact that we be the best-conditioned, most-disciplined and most team-oriented players on the floor at all times. Mulder, now in her 10th year as mayor of Arlington Heights, stressed the same type of unselfishness off the court.

"That staff lounge was covered in X's and O's," she recalled with a laugh. "I had no ego about it. When the women coaches would meet, we said, 'We don't want to be different from the men. We want to learn from what they've done right. We also want to see what doesn't work and see if we can find another way that's better.'"

By the time Mulder relinquished the reins to take a maternity leave that would become permanent after the birth of her son in '78, our goal was in clear sight. Star forwards Shirley Cohen and Diana Hintz had graduated, but our senior leader, Connie Erickson, had matured into the best all-around player in the state. And the rest of the starting lineup--guard Barb Atsaves, forwards Peggy Japely and Tina Conti and center Holly Anderson--developed into a capable and determined supporting cast that would carry us during a magical 28-1 season.

We had already begun our ritual of half-court games at 5 a.m., before school started. And thanks to Schnurr, boys were our regular scrimmage opponents in practice. "Billy hand-picked guys who were good athletes and good kids who respected you as athletes and clearly knew they were there to help and not embarrass you," Mulder said.

There was still the inevitable stray elbow by one of the boys and occasional tears by one of the girls, though they quickly stopped when the rest of us implored her to shake it off and get back in the action.

If we couldn't be the biggest team in the state, we would be the smartest, most tenacious and hardest working, we told ourselves as we ran still another circuit of stairs. Mulder also had us eating with our non-dominant hands to improve our ballhandling.

All of it would be an education for Earl, who had to adjust to this strange band of teenagers who sang on the bus and shot free throws to the strains of the Beach Boys and Styx as he negotiated that fine line between appropriate and inappropriate backside slapping.

"I was quite nervous about that," he acknowledged with a smile. "Men do that to guys all the time, but it's not something an old guy should be doing to teenage girls. My buddies would tell me, 'Earl, you're going to have to coach with your hands in your pockets.'"

Mulder had given us a single-mindedness and drive that Earl merely had to steer. Earl then developed a killer array of full-court defenses that intimidated opponents and made for quick blowouts.

"After playing against boys every day, the girls looked like they were moving in slow motion," Earl said, recalling specific scoring runs as if they had just happened.

The energy was boundless and apparently contagious as first a school and soon a community rallied around us, packing the very gym where girls were once not permitted to practice.

A teachers strike that fall had put Earl in a difficult spot. After deciding he had a moral responsibility to teach, he chose to cross the picket line.

"There were teachers who would not speak to me in the hallways or faculty lounge but would come to our games and acknowledge me there, simply because of the job we were doing," Earl said. "The team had a unifying effect on the whole school."

Now a celebrity in state prep circles, the man who was determined to give up coaching before that fall of '79 so he could watch his son play high school sports is about to join the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

"I fell in love with coaching all over again," Earl said. "You girls, that team, changed my life."

Mulder never attended a game in the '79 season because she was afraid of disrupting the team's chemistry with our new coach. Still, she looks back on her four years of coaching as a life-altering experience.

"It was never about winning and losing for me," Mulder said. "It was the medium to learn about life, learning to play together, setting goals and achieving them. And if that resulted in winning, great, and if it didn't, that was OK too. There were times when you guys would come off the court dejected after a victory because we hadn't achieved our goals."

Schnurr remained in the background as well, hesitant at first to attend the 25-year reunion scheduled at the school Friday night. "But I'll be there," he said quietly. "I want to see you girls."

The remnants of 25 years ago are somewhat scattered now, in attics and basements, the lack of technology as we know it today restricting many memories to our heads and our hearts.

I think back at our young celebrity now, and it is every bit as cool as it was then. The trip to Springfield to meet with Gov. Thompson and the resolution submitted to the Illinois General Assembly. The banquets we attended with the '79 boys state champions, Maine South, and a DePaul team fresh off its Final Four appearance. And maybe the coolest honor of all, our appearance on "The Ray Rayner Show."

It was Illinois' version of the pinnacle of high school success, and our trip to WGN that morning capped everything. We learned that Ray's Post-its said nothing, that Chelveston was about the fifth or six duck he had--"What, do you think ducks live 20 years?" he said when we pressed him on it--and that Ray was every bit the sweetheart of our childhoods.

Twenty-five years later, Earl still claims we could give any state championship team a run. Well, not as we are now. But it hardly matters.

I still have the bright red satin jacket with my name and number 10 on the front (most of us still have our numbers on license plates and in e-mail addresses), and "Niles West 1979 State Champions" in script on the back.

My 8-year-old daughter is fascinated by it. "Gosh, Mom, you actually wore this? I mean, in public?"

"With pride," I say.

She plays in a basketball league where already the defensive intensity is amazing. She also takes pompom. What are you going to do? I pretty much realized the first time she got a hit in T-ball and skipped to first base that as parents, we only have so much control over such things.

I wish for her only that she finds something that stirs her passion, something to bond her in team unity as we did.

I want both my kids to experience that same hunger we had in reaching for our dream. I can only wish they find the sweetness we did in achieving it.