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UP AND RUNNING

Spartans open new season with home win over Taft, Page 38



Glenbrook North wide receiver Avery Burow looks upfield after catching a pass Friday, Aug. 30, in Northbrook, during Glenbrook North's 40-28 victory over Taft High School. CARLOS ALVAREZ/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

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Northbrook's Isaacson honors her past in new book

NEIL MILBERT
Freelance Reporter

On their basketball bus trips back in the late 1970s, Melissa Isaacson and her Niles West teammates would chant "Give me an R, give Me an A ...", as they spelled "Ray Rayner," the name of the host of a popular kids show on WGN-TV.

Since their freshman year, the members of the class of 1979 had been steadfast in their determination to win the state tournament, and they knew if they accomplished that feat, they could expect an invitation to appear on his show.

Little did they know that 40 years after they became the 1979 State champions at Assembly Hall in Champaign — and then made their appearance on Ray Rayner's show — that they would be making another TV appearance and this time they'd be going before a national TV audience on the NBC Today Show.

Their scheduled appearance on Today's Third Hour segment is scheduled for 9 a.m. on Sept. 13. The segment was filmed at Niles West and at the Northbrook home of Isaacson and her husband, Rick Mawrence, on Aug. 24 when she hosted a reunion of the team that took the third-ever state title in Illinois girls basketball and the last in which there was only one class.

Every living member of the team showed up and these players were joined by three who graduated in 1978 when Niles West lost in the Super-Sectionals.

Not only was this get-together a commemoration of what they had collectively achieved, it also was a celebration of "State: A Team, A Triumph, A Transformation," the book in which Isaacson describes their life-changing journey.

Published in mid-August by Midway Books, writing "State" was in the author's words, "nearly a 12-year process."

It was conceived in 2004 when Isaacson, who then was working for the Chicago Tribune, wrote a column that coincided with the 25th anniversary of that championship season.

From then on she worked on the book in fits and starts — "stopping and then picking it up again" — until about five years ago when her friend, Sports Illustrated writer S.L. Price, convinced her she had a powerful story to tell and should "just tell it." From then on, she immersed herself in her labor of love, editing what she already had written and crafting it into a people story rather than a sports story.

There were many labor pains.

"I never before had to do a book proposal," Isaacson explained. "I never had to

go to a publisher and look for agents and all that stuff. That's agony in itself — rejection times 100. I paid \$40 for an agent to talk to me for a minute. It was kind of like when I was first applying for jobs as a sportswriter (in the 1980s): 'We love you. You're great. But we have a woman.'"

In doing her research, Isaacson reconnected with all of her teammates and they relived their four years at Niles West: the thrill of putting on their first uniforms that made them "the official representatives of our school," the 5:30 a.m. practices on their own, the many victories and the relatively few defeats. All of that and a whole lot more.

"Some things I didn't remember and teammates had to fill in," Isaacson said. "Certain people had certain stories. Goofy things they just remembered. In those days, some people kept scrapbooks. Some kept diaries."

Isaacson reached out to Arlene Mulder, her coach for her first three years who planted the seeds that produced the championship season, and to Gene Earl, who reluctantly replaced Mulder when she took a maternity leave, won the state title in his first experience with female athletes and remained the Niles West girls' coach until his retirement in 1990.

She discovered "Gene



Northbrook resident Melissa Isaacson dives into a historic part of her past in her latest book, "State: A Team, A Triumph, A Transformation." PHOTO SUBMITTED

Earl has an incredible memory."

The result of all of her research is a book that not only is a treasure trove of minute detail but also is an in-depth examination of the hearts and minds of teenage girls and the adults who shaped them and were likewise transformed in the process.

"It has fulfilled a powerful obligation I have felt to tell our story, a story I believe is an incredibly important story to tell," Isaacson said. "I discovered what basketball did for us went well beyond the state

championship."

Jackie Joyner-Kersey was one of the stars of the East St. Louis team that Niles West defeated in the state championship game.

"I remember Niles West beating us like it was yesterday," said Joyner-Kersey, who went on to win three Olympic gold medals in track and field. "Basketball helped Melissa and her teammates find something bigger than just the game — they found inner strength. Anyone picking up this book will be inspired and encouraged to also find their inner strength and,

with the help of others, believe in themselves."

In the book's epilogue, Isaacson writes about an interview with Birch Baye, the former U.S. Senator who co-sponsored the 1972 Title IX legislation that prohibited sex discrimination in educational programs, thereby opening the door for female participation in high school and college athletics.

"What you did changed our lives," she told him after she'd finished her interview. "It made me choose the career that I did, the man whom I married, how we raised our children. It gave me and my teammates an identity and self-esteem that girls just a few years older didn't have the same chance of having."

After recounting what she told Baye, Isaacson ends her epilogue by reflecting: "I didn't tell him as Becky (Schnell) had told me, that it saved us. But I know it did."

Not only did Isaacson play basketball for Niles West — subbing on the varsity as a freshman, starting in the backcourt as a sophomore and junior and then returning to a reserve role as a senior — she starred on the softball team, earning All-Conference and All-Area honors.

From Niles West, she went to the University of Iowa where she studied journalism and "played

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SOCCER

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and he's ready to show that this season.

"It's a really great team

chemistry that we have this year," Martens said. "We have a senior group that's been playing together since we were in third grade, so it's a culmination

of hard work for a long time and everyone loves playing with each other. It's great to have a great team chemistry."

One of the bigger ob-

stacles facing the Spartans will be the school's shift over to the Central Suburban League South division. After spending much of its history in the North

where the Spartans controlled play, they're ready for a new test in a division that features some of the best teams in the state.

"We know that we're

in for a challenge and it's a challenge we're willing to accept," Vignocchi said. "It'll make us better by the time we get to the playoffs."

ATHLETE OF THE MONTH

↑ POSTED TO NorthbrookTowerDaily.com 1 DAYS AGO

Skaja hands Spartans second straight monthly honor

MICHAL DWOJAK
Sports Editor

The Glenbrook North boys lacrosse community came out in full force in August.

After boys lacrosse player Jakob Sorkin handed his alma mater its first 22nd Century Media Athlete of the Month honor in 2019 for the month of July, Spartans fans rocked the vote and helped his former teammate, Matt Skaja, win August's competition, giving North its second win of 2019.

Skaja battled out Glenbrook South girls soccer alumna Katie Sullivan and ultimately won the month's honor with 479 votes. Sullivan finished second, fol-



Glenbrook North's Matt Skaja was named 22nd Century Media's July Athlete of the Month. 22ND CENTURY MEDIA FILE PHOTO

lowed by Glenbrook North girls badminton player Ashley Yoshikawa and Glenbrook South boys basketball alumnus Zach Carr.

Skaja added the honor after helping his program win its IHSA sectional, earning a match at a super-

sectional.

Voting lasted from Aug. 10-25. The Athlete of the Month contest for athletes selected in the month of August gets underway on Sept. 10 and will end on Sept. 25. Vote at NorthbrookTower.com.

many other sports, including the Summer and Winter Olympic Games.

Isaacson considers covering the Bulls to be the highlight of her sportswriting career.

"I started in 1991, the year I got married, and when my honeymoon ended I went straight to the Bulls," she remembered. "What a wonderful ride that was. I covered their second championship in 1991-92 and their third championship in 1992-93. I became pregnant during the 1994-95 season when Michael Jordan came back but I continued covering them (before going on the Bears' beat in 1996). With basketball, I was always at home — when you've played a sport there's a language there."

"When I played in the NBA, we had many discussions about our love of

basketball," Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "The topic of her high school state title-winning team came up now and then and I knew she was proud of it. But until now, after reading her fantastic book did I realize how much basketball meant to her. This is a beautiful story of basketball and life."

Long before her book was published it was obvious that Isaacson's writing ability extended beyond the sports arenas to pondering the ups and downs in the game of life.

While still covering sports, Isaacson first branched out in 2008 when she wrote a touching story for the Tribune Magazine entitled "Fade to black—something's not right."

Full story at NorthbrookTower.com.

AUGUST ATHLETE OF THE MONTH CANDIDATES

Glenbrook North

Kasey Venn, girls swimming and diving
Alexandra Chertok, girls track and field
Joey Martens, boys soccer
Nico Adducci, boys soccer
Robby O'Regan, boys golf
Andrew Koulogeorge, football

Glenbrook South

Jhovany Guadarrama, boys soccer
Katie Gates, girls soccer
Aaron Chong, boys golf
Aidan Prikos, football

Loyola Academy

Mary Boesen, girls golf
Caroline Smith, girls ice hockey
Trevor Cabanban, football

New Trier

Kasey Venn, girls swimming and diving

Highland Park

Katherine Ohlwein, girls soccer
Giovanni Volpentesta, football
Kathryn Murphy, girls tennis
Ethan Fineman, boys soccer
Billy Gimbel, football

Lake Forest

Matthew Garrigan, boys lacrosse
Nate Schmitt, boys cross-country
Gracie McGowan, field hockey
Mary Margaret Reay, girls volleyball
Charle Aberle, football

North Shore Country Day

Caroline Segal, field hockey

ISAACSON

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intramurals every chance I got."

She began her sportswriting career at the student newspaper, the Daily Iowan, and fittingly covered coach Lute Olson's basketball teams, including one that made it to the Final Four.

From Iowa her career path took her to Florida, where she was a sportswriter for Florida Today (who covered the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the Super Bowl) and the Orlando Sun-Sentinel.

In 1990 she returned to the metropolitan area as a sportswriter for the Chicago Tribune and remained there until 2009. She was a beat writer first for Illinois basketball and then for the Bulls and Bears. She also covered mega-events in

2019 STANDINGS

CENTRAL SUBURBAN LEAGUE SOUTH DIVISION

Evanston	1-0 overall, 0-0 conference
Glenbrook North	1-0, 0-0
New Trier	1-0, 0-0
Glenbrook South	0-1, 0-0
Maine South	0-1, 0-0
Niles West	0-1, 0-0

CCL/ESCC BLUE DIVISION

Brother Rice	1-0, 0-0
Mount Carmel	1-0, 0-0
Marist	1-0, 0-0
Loyola Academy,	0-1, 0-0

FOOTBALL

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little different."

"Instead of having an interception go for touchdown, I had all the offensive linemen, who are to thank for giving me the touchdown, coming running at me," he said "I'm not going to lie, it was kind of scary ... but it felt good."

The standout Spartan continued his strong night late in the game when he sealed North's victory with

his second touchdown of the night — a 31-yard run in which he shed multiple would-be tacklers.

"I really wanted that one," Ciss said. "... I don't know how I stayed up. I just kept my feet moving and kept chugging toward the end zone."

Looking ahead

The Spartans will travel to River Grove next week to face off with St. Patrick High School.

The Shamrocks opened

their season with a 38-0 loss against CSL South opponent Evanston. But the Spartans are expecting another tough matchup in Week 2.

"We have to be more physical (next week)," Purdy said. "We have to be more discipline. We can't let the big play happen. We have to be in the right spot. They're going to be a physical football team and they always are."

Kickoff is at 7 p.m., Saturday, Sept. 7.