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Cougars part of Hancock Owls' class act

Summary: They're still talking about the Hancock Owls girls' basketball team and the three coaches who nurtured the team throughout its phenomenal season - three coaches, each with her/his own story and all with close ties to the University of Minnesota, Morris.

(April 6, 2007)-It's been a couple of weeks since the Hancock Lady Owls girls' basketball team captured the state's second-place Class A high school basketball title and showed Minnesota high school basketball fans that they are, by any league's standards, a class act. The net has been cut from the hoop in the Target Center. Stats have been entered into the record books. The trophy has been placed alongside others in the school's trophy case. But they're still talking about the team, the game and the three coaches who nurtured the team throughout its phenomenal season – three coaches, each with her/his own story and all with close ties to the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM).

Hancock Owls head coach for the past 10 years, Jodi Holleman, recalls the “unbelievable experience” at the state tournament as she goes about her “other job” as accounts specialist in the Office of Intercollegiate Athletics at UMM. Holleman's connections with other UMM coaches come in handy.

“I've got good connections with Coach (Tim) Grove (UMM women's head basketball coach),” said Holleman. “I bounce ideas off him. He drew up three quick-hit plays for me for the tournament game.” In turn, Holleman assists UMM coaches by referring student athletes she sees, encouraging her team to attend Cougar games. “Some of my work-study students show up at our Hancock games.”

If Holleman looked calm and collected on television during the state tournament, it was by design. “I just blocked (the tournament frenzy) out,” said Holleman, whose daughter Bree, plays for the Hancock Owls. “My team totally believes in me. If I'm rattled, they are. If I'm nervous, they are too.”

Holleman maintains an “incentive board” which includes every team member. “They get stickers for rebounds, steals, assists, everything except scoring points. It's all about team-no one ever asks to see the stats,” said Holleman, who stresses the fundamentals for 45 minutes everyday. “We don't turn the ball over very often we're very disciplined.”

The Owls' assistant coaches, Chad Christianson and Stacey Johnson are both UMM students who work in the athletic office and showed interest in the Hancock girls' team. Senior Christianson also pitches for the Cougar baseball team, which was playing in Florida when word came that the Hancock team was in the championship game. “I got calls on Wednesday (of the state tournament) updating me on the score,” said Christianson, who said it was difficult to decide whether to stay in Florida or return. “When they won, I got an earlier flight, which arrived in the Twin Cities later than scheduled. I got to the Target Center as the girls were walking off the court.” A gamer to the end, Christianson kept his pledge to the team: if they won, they could shave a line down the middle of his hair and dye it with the school's colors.

A freshman at UMM who played center while attending high school in Becker and had played basketball in Becker since the fifth grade, Johnson had her own sense of drama as she watched her hometown team win the Class AAA

championship. An elementary education major with a coaching emphasis, Johnson thought the state tournament experience was “scary and overwhelming. But it was “exciting to see coaches and players I knew.” Johnson is the daughter of Jean and Steve Johnson, Becker.

A native of Verndale, Christianson, in his first year of coaching, recognizes that a high school coach needs to be a lot calmer than a college coach. He felt that his UMM experience has helped prepare him as a coach for the Owls. “UMM is a smaller school with a homey atmosphere you can have good relationships with anyone.” He was impressed with the maturity of his Owls team: “None of them cried they were ladylike and mature.” He reminded the girls that, “there are 290-plus teams in high school Class A who’d love to trade places with you right now.”

All three coaches talked of the overwhelming support of the Hancock and area communities—parents, spouses and fans. “Everything from recording stats to team meals for the bus ride to making corsages. Stacey’s mom washed the team’s uniforms between games and made barbecues for the entire team,” said Holleman, to cite one of many examples. “We couldn’t have done this by ourselves.”

“Hancock has a nice, family atmosphere,” added Johnson. “People came out of the woodwork to help,” said Christianson, whose wife, Ashley, also a UMM student, supported and contributed to the team.

Christianson and Johnson both had high praise for their head coach. “What I discovered as her intern was a deep commitment by her girls, compassion from Jodi to her players and a team that plays together the likes of which I have never seen before,” said Johnson. “Jodi’s professionalism on and off the court, the respect she has for her girls and the knowledge that Jodi has shared with me is an opportunity that others can only dream about and I will always remember the experience. Being a player before, I didn’t always understand the coach’s perspective now I do.”

Photo: Holleman, standing left, Christianson and Johnson confer on the bench, during the State High School Tournament at the Target Center

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