

Defenders give home-schoolers a chance

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Noah Dargy is a starting forward and a senior leader on a team that went 18-3 this year and is headed to a national tournament. The fact that he and his team – the Defenders – are under the radar for most Metro basketball fans is of little concern to him.

“It doesn’t particularly matter to me if we’re in the paper,” says Dargy, a home-school student who describes himself lightheartedly as “5-foot-10-and-a-quarter – a little undersized for a power forward. That’s why I need the quarter inch.”

Dargy says he plays to have fun, be with his friends and reflect the religious values that underlie his team’s founding organization, Fellowship for Athletes Inc. (FFAI).

“Our emphasis is that everything we do is to honor God, whether it’s in practice or a game,” he explains. “If you knock a guy down, you pick him up, and everything you do is 100 percent. It adds another level of motivation to be a Christian.”

FFAI began 10 years ago as a series of basketball camps for boys and girls, says founder and head coach Ray Vasser.

“We were coming from a Christian perspective, instilling principles that kids can apply within the athletic realm but outside that realm as well. Six years ago we decided to create a varsity sports program for girls and boys, with home-school kids from Cedar Rapids and Marion as our main target.”

Called the Defenders, the resulting program includes a basketball team for girls in grades 6 through 12, a “junior high” team that includes boys in grades 4 through 8, and a high school boys team. FFAI also developed a volleyball team called the Comets that subsequently became an independent organization.

Vasser explains that the name Defenders is a reference to a Bible verse, I Peter 3:15, that urges Christ’s followers to be ready “to give a defense for the hope that is in you.”

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“We don’t Bible-beat,” he says, “but we try to teach biblical principles to live by. One of our key foundations is that the character of an athlete means developing self-discipline, creating good habits and good decision-making and always being truthful.”

A chance to play

Along with home-schoolers, the Defender teams, which currently have a total of 46 players, also attract a few students from area public schools who are simply looking for an opportunity to play, says Vasser.

“In the public school program, they start to build kids from an early age with AAU teams. They get familiar with them and filter them, and unless high school kids come up through this system, they have very little chance to play – especially home-school kids, but other kids as well.”

Defender players must maintain a 2.5 GPA, Vasser says, but are not required to profess a particular faith.

“We tell them our founding principles, but we don’t discriminate based on religious preference, and we avoid any politics or favoritism based on socioeconomic status. If a kid works hard, he’ll play. We are playing to win, and everyone is not going to play equally, but if they do what is asked, they will all play. My 12 varsity players all play a lot because they have earned the right to play.”

Vasser says the team’s goals are to acquaint students and families with Christ, let kids be kids and provide opportunities for those who hope to go on to play at the college level by developing their skills and helping them make contacts with colleges.

“We graduate 100 percent of our kids,” he says, “and 97 percent go on to college. Six of our kids have gone on to play sports at the next level, either in Division III or JuCo.”

Competition on the court

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The Defenders play a similar schedule to the public high schools and follow Iowa High School Athletic Association rules. For the first four years of the program, the varsity teams played 25 to 30 games with schools in the Heart of America Christian School Conference, a consortium of private schools.

“We were the only home-school team,” says Vasser. “The conference folded last year with the decline in private school enrollment. We’re an independent now, but we still play some of those schools, and we can scrimmage the public schools.”

The Defenders played Cedar Rapids Washington last year, losing by 12 points, and lost by six points to Marion this year. “I think we surprised some people with our level of play,” says Vasser, who was a co-captain on the 1987 Washington High School team that went to the state tournament under Coach Don King.

Vasser went on to play at Kirkwood Community College and walked on at the University of Northern Iowa. After an unsuccessful attempt to catch on with a couple of CBA teams, he retired from playing and began coaching. He assisted King with his summer camps for several years and continues to seek his coaching advice, Vasser says.

How teams are faring

The Defenders girls team went undefeated the last two seasons, then sank to 1-15 this year, suffering the fate of a small program that loses its core players.

With a group of seven seniors who have played together for several years, the boys team is on a strong run, going 28-6 last season and finishing third at the National Homeschool Tournament. Based on this year’s 18-3 record, they were the only Iowa team invited to this year’s tournament, which is being held this weekend (March 16-19) at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va.

Good experience for players

Senior Dargy likes his team’s chances, but retains a touch of humility. “I feel like we can win it,” he says. “We’re a little more cohesive this year. But I haven’t seen all the teams, and there could be a great team out there.”

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Regardless, he says, “my experience with the Defenders has been really, really great. I made a ton of friends, had a lot of fun and got better at basketball.

“We only have 26 kids in our entire high school program, so it’s not a ton of talent to draw from. But I feel that we compete at least at the 2A level (Class 2A in Iowa). We’re out there to win, working to get better every day, but it’s fun.”