

Panthers are all grown up now

Written by Tom Fruehling

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As the prep basketball season winds down, the hoops careers of a special group of local girls will also come to an end.

They're seniors now, playing for several different area teams, but in their younger years they bonded together as Cedar Rapids Panthers.

During a six-year period starting in 2007 as fourth graders they won five AAU state championships. Not only were they the very best girls team in Iowa, they were among the elite squads in the whole Midwest.

Their record over that stretch was a sterling 234-65 (.783 winning percentage).

Soon, they'll be going their separate ways.

All of them will be off to college, though only one is sure to play basketball. Accomplished multi-sport athletes, almost all of the others will compete on the collegiate level, but in soccer or softball.

Of the core bunch that stayed together the longest, undisputed Panthers star Arika Wooldridge of Center Point-Urbana has a basketball scholarship at Winona State University in Minnesota.

Kennedy's Carly Langhust will play soccer at Iowa State and teammate Sydney Hayden will do the same at UNI.

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Linden Runels (a member of Kennedy's select academic decathlon team) also has soccer plans at prestigious Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Cougar Paige Timmerman is set to play softball at Luther.



From Jefferson, Erin Kuba will continue softball at Indian Hills Community College. Fellow J-Hawk Sam Kitterman, who prides herself in leading the Panthers in fouls, is undecided on where she will attend college.

Only UNI-bound McKenna Andersen of Xavier will sit out sports.

With a cumulative grade point average above 4.0, their career plans range from medicine to teaching, engineering to physical therapy.

Admittedly biased, Erin Kuba's father Mike, an assistant softball coach at Jefferson, says every one of the girls has always excelled on and off the court.

"They're all very good athletes and very good students," he points out. "And they're all really nice girls with a lot of character."

Kennedy girls basketball Coach Tony Vis agrees.

"I've coached four of them," he says. "And as good as they are, they're even better as young people."

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“They’re great kids.”

All with cherished memories of that magical time in their life as a team when hoops dreams came true.

“I think for all of us,” says Langhurst, an all-state soccer player, “it was the highlight of our childhood.”

Adds Erin Kuba, “We had a lot of fun back in the day, when we were little.”

They had all played basketball for at least a couple of years, but a few knew each before they joined up as Panthers.

“When they first came together in the summer before fourth grade, we didn’t know what we had,” recalls head coach Kirk Hayden, Sydney’s father.

“But when we started beating teams, like 50-4, we knew we had some really talented kids.”

And the longer they played together, the better they got.

Though they qualified five times, in the one year they chose to go to the national AAU tournament in Nashville they finished 21st out of 150 elite squads.

“And that was against teams that had guards that were 6-foot-1,” notes Kirk Hayden. “Just some amazing teams.”

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Over the course of six years, 13 girls played on the Panthers' nine-girl roster at one time or another. All but two continued to compete (and, for the most part, star) throughout high school.

"That was always our goal," says Hayden of the philosophy shared by assistant coach Brian Runels, Linden's dad. "To teach some skills. But make it enjoyable so that they would want to keep playing."

From November through March, the girls gathered twice a week for practices.

Then, usually three weekends out of four, they would travel to tournaments all over Iowa, even to St. Louis, the Twin Cities, Kansas City or Chicago. They often were matched with teams that were older, bigger, faster and stronger.

Of their 65 losses, 40 came against teams from upper-age brackets, many of whom they'd beaten or would beat later.

"That gave us better competition," recalls Andersen. "It gave us higher expectations and we got used to winning.

"And it really made us become better teammates. We were very close as a team. We all got along. There was never any drama between us."

They joke that they were never even jealous of Wooldridge, by far the tallest girl on a squad full of quick guards.

"Anika was always the tournament MVP," says Sydney Hayden, another all-state soccer player. "And she always deserved it."

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“We played for each other. And I know that helped us in our other sports.”

Her coach/dad contends unselfish play and team chemistry set them apart, even at a young age.

“I remember playing a team in Chicago, and their girls were all spread out watching the game ahead of ours. Our girls were sitting together like always. They did everything together.

“I told the girls before the game that we were going to win, because the others would play as individuals and we would play as a team.

“And that’s what happened. We skunked 'em.”

Theirs was a comraderie formed by hours and hours together over several years at a formative young age. On the court, of course, but also on road trips and overnight stays.

They all recall with glee, for instance, the night they spent at an Embassy Suites Hotel in Des Moines during their last state tournament.

With rewards points, Kirk Hayden was given an upgraded room with a large jacuzzi and was coaxed into letting all nine teen-age girls stay there unsupervised.

They ordered pizza, played tag up and down the glass elevators and never slept.

“Oh, we still won our game in the finals the next day,” Langhurst points out. “We were pretty serious when we played. But we always had a ton of fun.”