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
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Blue Thunder makes noise with local talent

BY CORY ISENBERG
The Tribune-Democrat

When individuals work together for a common cause, it creates a special bond between them.

That's one of the reasons that athletes who labor together on a team become a very special family-like unit.

The PA Blue Thunder basketball squad for girls age 15 and younger promotes that kindred atmosphere and that mindset helped the players when they recently participated in a tournament in Raleigh, N.C.

It wasn't just any tournament for the participants, which include three area players – Ferndale's Brittany Eisenhuth, Conemaugh Valley's Taylor Gruss and Northern Cambria's Janae Dunchack, all sophomores.

The Deep South Classic in Raleigh, N.C., featured 250 teams and was played on the courts of Duke University, North Carolina State University and the University of North Carolina.

The Blue Thunder defeated five teams from across the country, topping the Air Oklahoma Stars from Edmond, Okla., 53-42 in the championship game on the center court of the Dean Smith Center in Chapel Hill (N.C.).

It is believed to be central Pennsylvania's first AAU national tournament championship.

"It was really exciting to win," Dunchack said. "I just always wanted to go to North Carolina and see the different campuses like Duke and North Carolina. It was really nice there and a really good experience.

"It was great and a whole lot of fun. All the girls are really good and really experienced. They know about basketball and what they are doing. They are really good to be with."

In addition to the three area girls, the team consists of six freshmen and sophomores from central Pennsylvania including Alyson Leyo of Harmony, Marraya Moyer and Paige Robertson of Altoona, Alexis Valentine and Bryanna Valentine, both of Mifflinburg, and Alli Williams of Bishop Guilfoyle.

"It really says great things about the high school basketball in this area," Blue Thunder coach Doug Roberts said. "It's nice to see kids from a small area get the recognition they deserve. I couldn't be happier for the kids. They really deserved it. The big thing is that they are a great bunch of kids. It's like a dream coaching these kids. This is the best group I've ever been around."

AAU basketball is often considered to be very cutthroat.

"There have probably been teams out there that have had more talent than we do, but they don't play the team ball that these girls do," Roberts said. "Our parents and kids look at the scoreboard, they don't ask to see the scorebook. Our kids know that the key to winning is to play good defense and don't turn the ball over. The kids understand that and keep the other team from getting into any kind of comfort zone."




Practices for the team are held at a central gathering spot in Altoona.

"It's pretty much the same as playing with the girls on Northern Cambria's team," Dunchack said. "In the Blue Thunder, we're pretty much all family now because we hang out together a lot and practice everywhere and we get along great. We work together perfectly."

Roberts says he knows why his girls have been successful.

"All the of players on the team rank in the top of their high school classes academically and that contributes directly to their success on the court," the coach said. "We can just draw up a play in the

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middle of the game and they're not lost. They understand concepts and make it work. These kids are exceedingly mentally tough and very intelligent."

Several of the Blue Thunder players are already being recruited by Division I college basketball programs.

PA Blue Thunder was a runner-up at the Syracuse AAU National Qualifier in June 2007 and finished third at the United States Junior National Tournament last July.

"These are just 15-year-olds, just kids," Roberts said.

PA Blue Thunder will play its next tournament at the Syracuse PreNationals in mid-June before playing in the Penn State Blue Chip tournament in early July and the U.S. Junior Nationals in Washington, D.C., at the end of July.



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