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Chemistry carries NC on big journey

Commentary

By Philip Cmor

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UNIVERSITY PARK — Whether it won or lost Friday afternoon in the PIAA Class AA championship team, the Northern Cambria High School girls basketball team had already made an impression that figures to endure.

The little school making the improbable run to the finals always is a great story. These Lady Colts had that going for them, along with an exciting, up-tempo style of play that eventually captured the imagination of a region.

Halfway through the season they couldn't even fill all the seats of their own gymnasium to watch one of their best players score her 1,000th point in a critical conference game.

When it was all said and done, they had fans from other schools showing up to support them.

"They made so many memories this year. We're never going to forget them," Northern Cambria coach Eric Thomas said.

The Lady Colts broke the rules and defied convention for a team that would make it to the state championship. If you were trying to build a team that would go a long way, they wouldn't be your blueprint.

Sure, they were fast and could jump well. But they had a point guard who relied heavily on her strong hand, a two guard whose shooting form almost resembled that of someone throwing a softball and two forwards who were both 5-foot-8.

After the state quarterfinal win over Girard, Thomas charitably described the Lady Colts' movement-starved halfcourt offense as "not pretty," and end-of-game free-throw shooting was always something of an adventure, even in tight postseason games. The maximum number of players Thomas typically utilized was five or six.

In some ways, they were almost a throwback to the 50s or 60s.

If it sounds something like "Hoosiers," consider that the team that film had been based upon, Milan, actually had been to the Indiana semifinals the year before it won it all. The Lady Colts had never even been beyond the District 6 semifinals. No one was going to confuse the low-key Thomas with Gene Hackman's volatile Norman Dale, and the Lady Colts didn't have a go-to scorer like Jimmy Chitwood.

However, the scene of 10 buses — appropriately enough, black and gold — in a convoy up Interstate 99 was evocative of scenes from that great film.

No, this wasn't the type of team most coaches would want to pattern their squad after. That is, unless you were looking at the intangibles. What the Lady Colts lacked in several of the aspects that most coaches covet, they had an overabundance of two — heart and guts.

"We just love the game. Our love for the game, and our desire and determination got us here," senior forward Brittany Sedlock said.

That played out in the improvement the Lady Colts made from last year to this season. Northern Cambria had essentially the same group of athletes in 2006-07, but that didn't help them get any further than the District 6 quarterfinals.

In the offseason, they did something rare for a physically gifted collection of players that meet with some success on the court. They learned to play the game.

They could have continued settling for bad shots, missing layups, being careless with the ball and being overly aggressive on defense just because they could get away with it against lesser opponents. Instead,

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they dedicated themselves to making better decisions and understanding what needed to be done to elevate to the next level and bought into Thomas' defense-first philosophy.

"Our girls never give up. They have that never-die attitude. They give 100 percent," Thomas said. "They kept fighting through and said 'come on, we can do this.' And they're believers."

That confidence that also played in Northern Cambria's run to the finals cannot be understated. The first step in doing anything is thinking that you can. In spite of all the things that could be perceived as shortcomings or stumbling blocks, the Lady Colts never gave any impression that they doubted themselves.

More than anything, Northern Cambria exhibited that rarest of traits — chemistry. They were all outstanding individual athletes, but, as a basketball team, they were greater than the sum of their parts.

"We worked so well as a team," senior guard Jen Valeria said. "It wasn't just one person. All of us could have been the leading scorer on another team, but we just worked so well as a team and got along so well."

So the 52-40 final score was more like the conclusion to the book "The Natural," where Roy Hobbs strikes out, instead of hitting the pennant-winning home run like in the movie. So the latter would have made the ending sweeter. In a little time, that will mean little in comparison to the run itself.

Even a few minutes after they received their silver medals, Valeria's and Sedlock's tears were drying and smiles were emerging.

"It's really wonderful to have gotten to play here," Sedlock said. "A lot of teams never get that chance."

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