

LOCAL SPORTS JOURNAL



ALL-LSJ PLAYERS OF THE YEAR

Josh Laman Kelsey Richards

A CUT ABOVE

Alyza Winston TJ McKenzie

Plus...



QB Alex Carder has become the face of the Ironmen - but still dreams about the big time.

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LOCALSPORTS
Journal

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NO QUIT IN THIS OLD COACH



Paul Herremans is in his 29th year of coaching baseball at Ravenna, with no retirement in sight.

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

So when does an old coach finally decide that enough is enough?

For Paul Herremans, the answer may very well be never.

He's experienced more than most high school coaches, or sports fanatics in general, could ever dream of.

He's been coaching the Ravenna varsity baseball team for 29 years, and took his team to the state semifinals in his very first



season. His teams have won or shared the West Michigan Conference championship five times, and won three district championships and one regional title.

Last June he had the honor of being inducted in the Michigan High School Baseball Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

He is a former Ravenna varsity football head coach and a longtime JV football coach. As a JV coach, he's always helped

with the varsity squad, so he got to play a big part in the glory years, when the Bulldogs won state championships in 1994, 1996, 1997 and 2003.

Herremans also had the rare thrill of being an National Football League dad for more than a decade. His son Todd Herremans, a Ravenna graduate, had a long, successful career as an offensive lineman with the Philadelphia Eagles.

But even after all of that, Herremans keeps coming back for more. He retired from teaching in 2010, but that meant nothing when it came to his coaching plans.

"I tell people that I didn't retire from teaching - I just retired

from correcting papers," Herremans said.

He obviously means it. When the 2018-19 school year rolled around, he was back on the sidelines as the offensive coordinator of the Ravenna JV football team, then coached the eighth grade boys basketball team, and is now beginning yet another season of varsity baseball.

And his retirement from teaching is only semi-retirement, because he still substitutes around 100 days per school year.

The end of coaching varsity baseball may be on the horizon for Herremans. But that's still a few years away, and it probably won't take him very far from the playing fields of Ravenna.

He has an 11-year-old granddaughter who is already a softball standout, and could find herself on the Ravenna varsity squad in a few short years.

"When she gets in high school, I'm pretty sure I am going to see if I can worm my way into the softball dugout," Herremans said with a chuckle.

His son Todd Herremans, was asked if he's surprised his dad is still coaching, after all these years.

"He loves what he does," Todd said. "He loves impacting people and creating relationships and building on them. When he's coaching or teaching, he can do that on a daily basis. That's what keeps him around it."

Touching a lot of lives

Herremans, who turns 67 this month, has spent most of his life with the Ravenna school district, in one way or the other.

He graduated from Ravenna High School in 1970, played three years of football at Olivet College, then returned to Ravenna as a teacher in 1974.

He has coached a little bit of just about every sport since then, including six years as the head varsity football coach, and a lot of years as a junior varsity assistant. He also spent a few years coaching football at Coopersville High School, even while he still taught at Ravenna.

But most of his coaching success has come on the baseball diamond.

He took over the Ravenna varsity team in 1991, replacing Dusty Fairfield, who is more famous for leading the Bulldogs to state foot-



This group of old Ravenna baseball players got together last summer to surprise Coach Herremans before his induction into the state coaches Hall of Fame.

ball championships.

Herremans found success right away in baseball. His first team posted a 27-4 record and a perfect 14-0 conference mark. It won district and regional championships, before losing in the Class C state semifinals to Erie Mason.

The old coach still has a soft spot in his heart for that first team, which included players whose names still ring a bell for many Ravenna fans, like Steve Crowley, Todd Place, Scott DeCamp, Terry DeJonge and Matt Broton.

"After that first year, I thought it was pretty easy," Herremans said. "That was a very unique bunch of kids. I think that group only lost a half dozen games at all levels, all the way through school.

"Those guys went out and played on their own all the time. They didn't have a lot of distractions and that's what they did. They went out to Conklin Park and played baseball. They learned the game kind of on their own."

Herremans' teams kept winning a lot in his first six seasons, when they shared or won the West Michigan Conference title five times.

A dry spell followed between 1997 and 2007, when his Bulldogs posted losing records in 8 of the 11 seasons. But there were bright spots for Herremans during that period. He got to coach his son Scott, a baseball All-Stater who graduated in 1997, and his son Todd, a football All-Stater who graduated in 2001.

The last 11 seasons have been much better for Herremans and Ravenna. The Bulldogs have posted winning records in eight of those years, and have been very competitive the past three, with his teams going 23-13, 22-11 and 19-13. The 2016 squad won a district championship before bowing out in regionals.

His overall record - 443-410 heading into this season - is nothing to sneeze at, considering Ravenna is one of the smaller schools in the West Michigan Conference, with a limited talent pool to draw from.

While his team won its last conference championship back in 1996, Herremans believes the competition with bigger schools makes the Bulldogs better at tournament time, and he's proud of the fact his team has been in the conference title hunt in recent seasons.

"We were close the last three years," he said.

Herremans' 2019 squad, which is just hitting the field for the season, will be very young, with four sophomores and a freshman on the roster. But Herremans thinks the Bulldogs may catch a few opponents by surprise.

"I'm all in," he said. "I still get excited about the games and each team every year. This year we are really young but really fast, and I think we're going to make some people uneasy by doing some things on the basepaths that they think we can't. The key is going to be getting on base."

While the thrill of competition obviously still burns for Herre-

mans, he says he keeps coaching for other reasons as well, far more important than the final outcome on the scoreboard.

"It's the opportunity to make a difference in kid's lives, beyond just making them better players," he said. "It's about trying to have an impact on how they live their lives. Sadly today, there are a lot of kids who have no supervision and nobody who cares about them. You try to pull those kids along and try to help them out."

Obviously the caring that the coach has shown his players over the years left a major impression, because dozens turned out last year to make a special time in his life even more special.

Last June Herremans was inducted into the MHSBCA Hall of



Fame. He was honored at a banquet, presented with a ring and a plaque, then was introduced during the high school East-West All-Star game at Comerica Park in Detroit.

But the best part for Herremans was a surprise, a few weeks before the induction.

"My wife told me we were going to an open house," Herremans said.

"But when we got

there, there were about 50 to 75 former players in the building, the conservation club. I was just blown away.

"I sat and talked to just about every guy there. Terry DeJonge still had his state Final Four t-shirt from 1991. He wore it, and it still fit pretty good. Some of the guys brought balls and gloves and played catch. We drank quite a bit of beer.

"Just about every guy I sat and talked to, I shared some kind of memory with. Afterward my son Todd asked me how I did that, how I recalled so much from so long ago. I just told him that every player is associated with some kind of memory I have."

Todd Herremans, who lives in Philadelphia these days but was home for the event, was thrilled for his dad.

"A couple of the older guys came up with the idea and put it in play," he said. "Dad was always talking about how cool it would be to have a pig roast every year with all of his old players. It was such a cool thing to actually be involved in.

"I was talking to my dad afterward about it, and how special it was. I said it was almost like a funeral when you're still alive. It was great to have all these people tell me how he positively affected their lives, and they could tell him, too."

One proud dad

While Herremans' resume paints the picture of a small town coach who stuck pretty close to home, he has first-hand experience in a much larger sports world that most of us only glimpse on TV.

It began in 2005, when his son Todd was selected in the fourth round of the NFL draft by the Philadelphia Eagles after four stand-out years as an offensive lineman at Division 2 Saginaw Valley State University.

Herremans beams with obvious pride when you ask him about the experience.

"You know how they have senior day in college, when the scouts all come and look at the seniors," Herremans said, when asked how Todd was first discovered by NFL teams. "Well the next day was junior day, and a lot of the scouts stuck around to watch them. Todd weighed 305 pounds, and ran a 4.85 40-yard dash. That put him on the radar. The next year there were scouts watching him all the time."

Ironically, the Eagles were not the team that appeared to be eyeing Todd Herremans before the draft, according to his dad.

"They had never spoken to him," Herremans said about the Eagles. "He got a call from Jacksonville and they said they were going to take him with the next pick. But a few minutes later they traded that pick to Philadelphia, and he was drafted by the Eagles."



Herremans and his son Scott during their Dawg Days together.

Herremans and his wife Marilee immediately took an active interest in their son's pro career. He remembers visiting the Eagles' training camp in Pennsylvania when Todd was a rookie, just trying to make the roster.

The Herremans weren't sure where players' parents were supposed to go, so they wandered in with thousands of interested fans.

"We just went in with everybody," Herremans said. "We talked to Todd and asked him if there was somewhere where parents should go, and his response was, 'I'm just trying

to make the team, leave me alone!' But my wife is pretty good at networking, and she talked to some people and found out there was a tent on the other side of the field for the parents."

Herremans also learned how quickly NFL players become celebrities, even when they are still rookies in their first training camp.

"That first time we went, we walked up to the fence after practice, and he came over to talk," Herremans said. "Within a few minutes there must have been 20 people reaching over us and shoving us, trying to get an autograph. I remember Todd saying, 'Take it easy on my parents, will you?'"

Having a son in the NFL was actually challenging for Herremans, because he wanted to attend as many games as possible, but still had to make a living.

"I was still teaching and coaching, so we would leave on Saturday morning, I would correct papers at the airport, correct papers in



the hotel room, maybe meet up with Todd for a little while on Saturday night, then go to the game on Sunday," Herremans said. "Then we would fly right home, and on Monday I was back in class."

Herremans said there were relatively few great perks for players' parents when it came to seats at games, particularly for road games.

"We went down, the second year maybe, to a game in Miami," he said. "We found out seats, and they were way up there, like four rows from the top. It was hotter than hell and my wife was really struggling. But then I noticed, two rows in front of us, were (star Philadelphia quarterback) Donovan McNabb's parents, so I thought, OK."

Todd Herremans became a starter for the Eagles in his second season, and was a solid, reliable performer for a decade. He started a total of 124 games for Philadelphia, which ranks sixth on the team's all-time list for offensive lineman.

The Eagles made the playoffs for five of the nine years that he was a starter.

Todd Herremans was finally released by the Eagles following the 2015 season, and signed with the Indianapolis Colts, but played sparingly for one season before calling it quits.

But he got a special treat last October, when his former team invited him back for a game, signed him to a contract for \$1, and allowed him to officially retire as an Eagle. He served as the team's honorary captain for that game and represented the Eagles at the pregame coin toss.

His parents were there to enjoy the special day.

"He included us in everything going on that day," Herremans said. "It was so much fun to see the number of people he knew and was friends with - coaches, players, security people, fans.

"We were walking back toward the stands, heading around the goalpost at halftime, and this young kid jumped up in the bleachers and yelled 'Hey Todd. please,' and he holds out a pen and football. Todd ran out of the line, took his football and signed it, and was high-fiving all the kids in the bleachers.

"People always ask me about how proud I am (of Todd being a pro football player), but I'm more proud of the kind of person he is and the relationships he made while he was there. His mother helped him run a foundation for a number of years. He gave back to the community a lot. He's just a very giving person with a sense of community. Both of my boys are that way."

Todd Herremans said he was thrilled to share that day, and his entire pro football experience, with his parents.

"They have been my biggest supporters since day one," he said. "They were always there to show support, drive me home, get me something to eat after the games, tell me everything would be OK after the losses. It was really cool to share the whole experience."



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A CUT ABOVE

2018-19 LSJ Players of the Year



Alyza Winston
MUSKEGON

Alyza Winston was a dominant force in her senior season, averaging 24.5 points. She was a Michigan Miss Basketball finalist and led her team to the Division 1 state semifinals.



Josh Laman
LUDINGTON

Josh Laman was an all-around standout for Ludington, averaging 16 points, 7.5 rebounds and 3.1 assists. He led the Cinderella Orioles to the Division 2 state semifinals.



TJ McKenzie
NORTH MUSKEGON

A player of the year for the second straight season, McKenzie averaged 20 points and four rebounds and led the Norse to a 20-2 record and conference title.



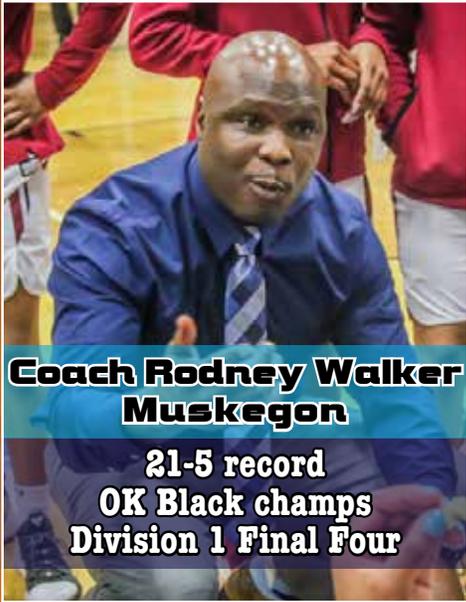
Kelsey Richards
FRUITPORT CALVARY

Richards averaged 21 points and seven rebounds and led the Eagles to their first regional title in school history, plus a berth in the Division 4 state quarterfinals.

DIVISION
1-2

DIVISION
3-4

DIVISION 1-2 GIRLS



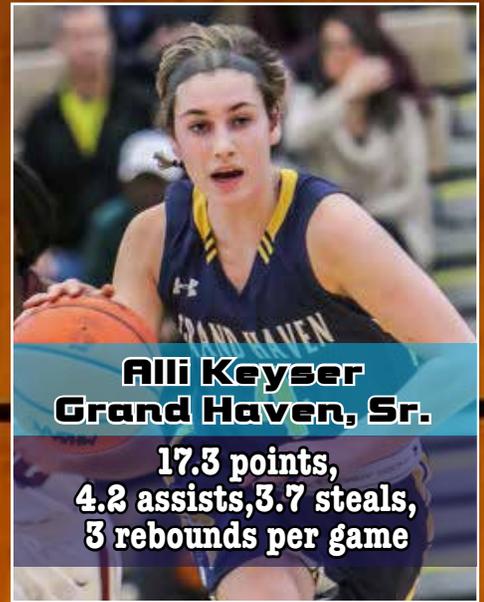
Coach Rodney Walker
Muskegon

21-5 record
OK Black champs
Division 1 Final Four



Alyza Winston
Muskegon, Sr.

24.5 points,
3 rebounds, 3 assists,
3 steals per game



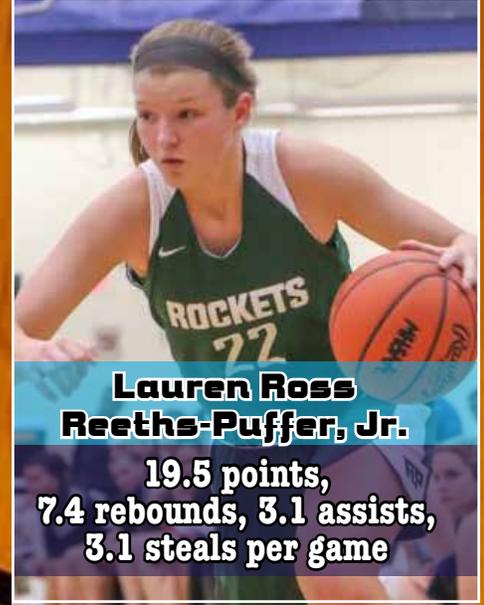
Alli Keyser
Grand Haven, Sr.

17.3 points,
4.2 assists, 3.7 steals,
3 rebounds per game



Sophia Wiard
Oakridge, Sr.

25.5 points,
8.6 rebounds, 7.1 assists,
4.4 steals per game



Lauren Ross
Reeths-Puffer, Jr.

19.5 points,
7.4 rebounds, 3.1 assists,
3.1 steals per game



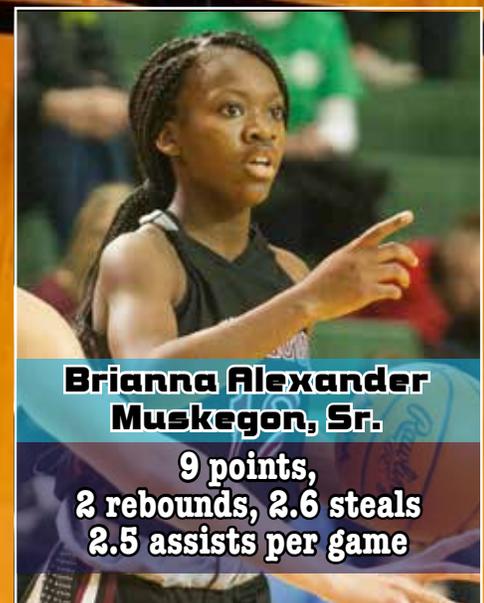
Jenna Core
Spring Lake, Sr.

12.5 points,
6.4 rebounds, 1.8 assists,
1.3 steals per game



Madeline Zenas
Spring Lake, Sr.

13.9 points,
10.4 rebounds,
1.3 steals per game



Brianna Alexander
Muskegon, Sr.

9 points,
2 rebounds, 2.6 steals
2.5 assists per game

DIVISION 1-2 BOYS



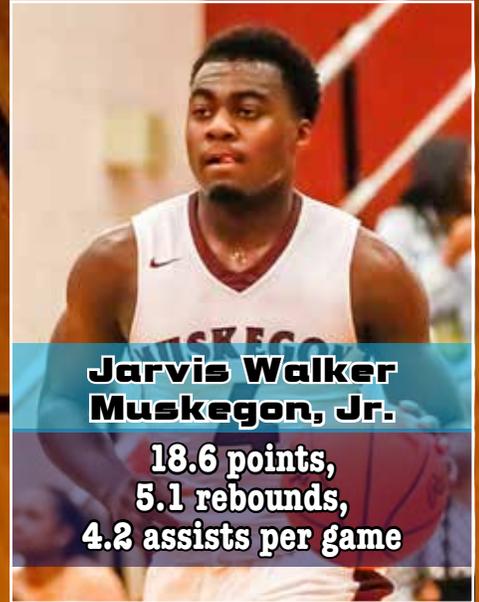
Coach Lance Johnson
Reeths-Puffer

17-6 record after going winless three years ago. D1 district finalists.



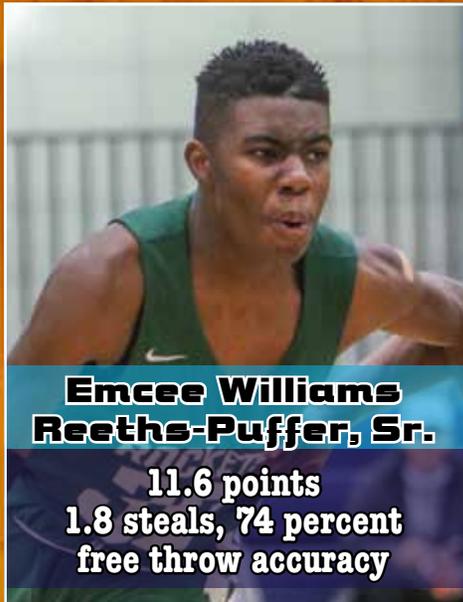
Josh Laman
Ludington, Sr.

16 points,
7.5 rebounds, 3.1 assists
2 steals per game



Jarvis Walker
Muskegon, Jr.

18.6 points,
5.1 rebounds,
4.2 assists per game



Emcee Williams
Reeths-Puffer, Sr.

11.6 points
1.8 steals, 74 percent
free throw accuracy

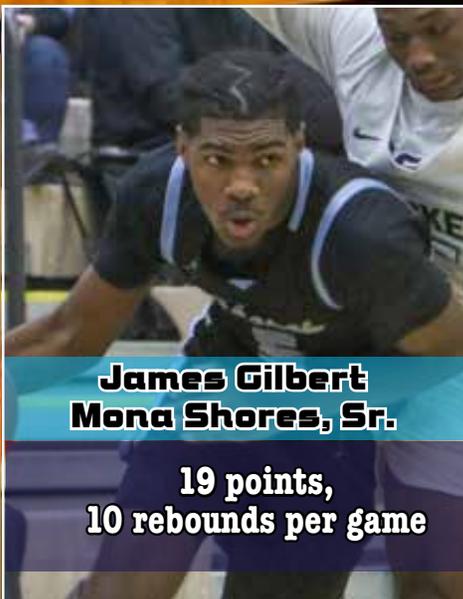


2018-19
ALL-LSJ
TEAMS



Logan Karnemaat
Fremont, Sr.

13.3 points
8.3 rebounds,
4.1 blocks per game



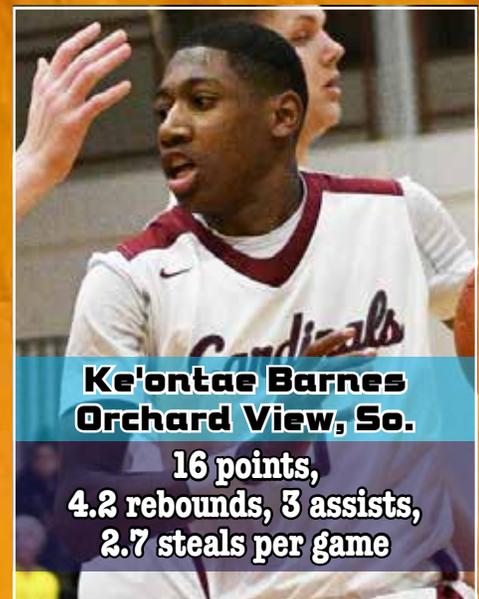
James Gilbert
Mona Shores, Sr.

19 points,
10 rebounds per game



Vern Nash
Muskegon, Jr.

15.6 points,
3.5 rebounds
4.5 assists per game



Ke'ontae Barnes
Orchard View, So.

16 points,
4.2 rebounds, 3 assists,
2.7 steals per game

DIVISION 3-4 GIRLS



Coach Scott Carlson
Kent City

19-5 record,
CSAA Silver champions,
D3 district champions



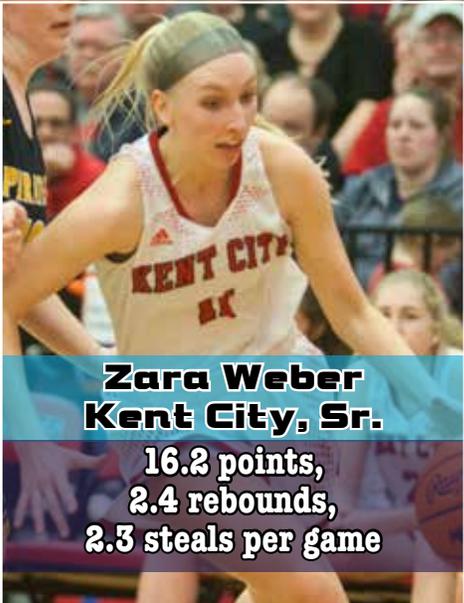
Kelsey Richards
Fruitport Calvary, Jr.

21 points
7 rebounds
2.5 assists per game



Jayd Hovey
Hart, Fr.

10 points,
6 rebounds, 2.2 steals
2.2 assists per game



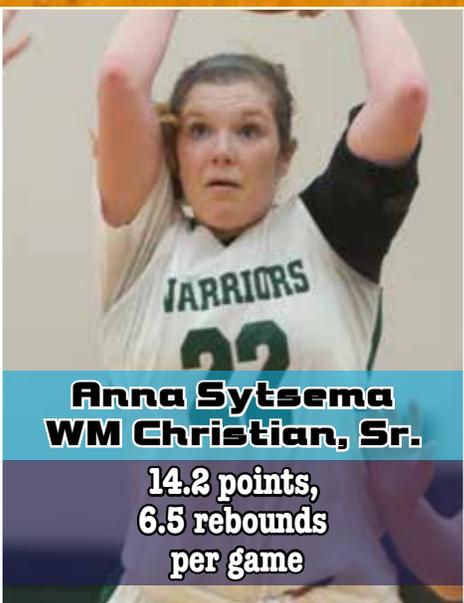
Zara Weber
Kent City, Sr.

16.2 points,
2.4 rebounds,
2.3 steals per game



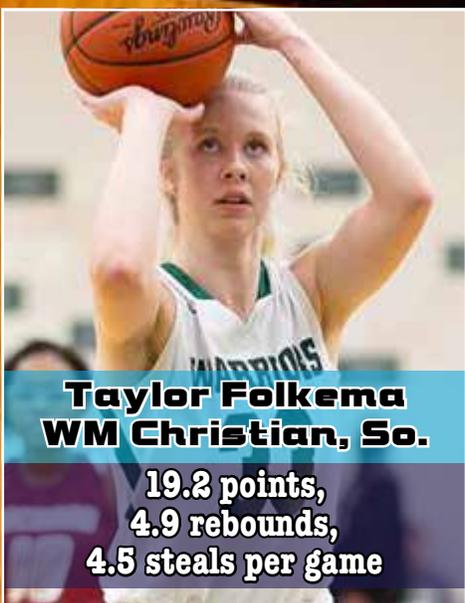
Kenzie Bowers

17 points,
6.3 rebounds, 4.3 assists,
4 steals per game



Anna Sytsema
WM Christian, Sr.

14.2 points,
6.5 rebounds
per game



Taylor Folkema
WM Christian, So.

19.2 points,
4.9 rebounds,
4.5 steals per game



Rachel Allen
Mason County Central, Sr.

12.4 points,
6.5 rebounds, 3.8 assists
3.5 steals per game

DIVISION 3-4 BOYS



Justin Johnson
Ravenna

15-7 record, steady improvement from four wins in first season in 2014-15.



TJ McKenzie
North Muskegon, Sr.

20 points, 4 rebounds, 2.5 steals, 2 assists, 1 block per game



Eli Carlson
Kent City, Jr.

17 points, 2.4 rebounds, 2.3 assists, 2 steals per game



Kevon Washington
Muskegon Heights, Sr.

17.2 points, 4.2 rebounds, 2 steals per game



Jeffrey Carrier
Mason County Central, Jr.

22 points, 12.4 rebounds, 2.9 blocks, 2.9 steals, 2.3 assists per game



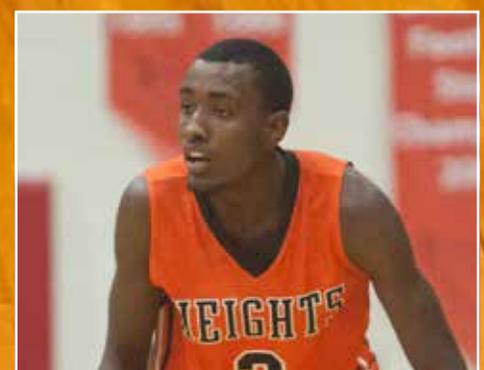
Josh Cox
Ravenna, Jr.

11.8 points, 3.7 rebounds, 2.2 assists, 1.7 steals per game



Jared Dugener
Muskegon Catholic, Jr.

20.1 points, 6.7 rebounds, 2.3 assists per game



Lamonte Townsend
Muskegon Heights, Sr.

14.4 points, 8.1 rebounds, 1 block per game

FINAL COMEBACK NOT QUITE ENOUGH

But the Big Reds girls basketball team posted the best season in program history

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

After their amazing come-from-behind, last-second win in the Division 1 state quarterfinals, and their incredible second-half comeback in the semifinals, the Muskegon girls basketball team almost seemed destined to win it all.

It was a shame that it all had to end on a very questionable call by a referee.

In the quarterfinals against DeWitt at Kalamazoo Loy Norrix High School, the Big Reds appeared to be in deep trouble at several different points in the game.

DeWitt led 26-19 at halftime and 46-41 midway through the fourth quarter.

But Muskegon fought back and pulled out the victory with a miracle finish.

The Big Reds had been setting up to take what they hoped would be the winning shot with less than a minute remaining in a tied game.

But then Muskegon's Diynasti Dowell accidentally dribbled off her foot near center court, the ball rolled out of bounds, and DeWitt took possession with 44 seconds left with a chance to steal the victory.

But the Big Reds did not let that final setback ruin their plans.

Brianna Alexander, a 5-foot-1 senior guard, knocked the ball away from a DeWitt player with less than 10 seconds left, then Alyza Winston, a finalist in the state's Miss Basketball competition, did the rest.

She grabbed the loose ball around center court, raced to the bucket and hit the winning shot with 4.2 seconds remaining, giving the Big Reds a breathtaking 53-51 victory and its first-ever berth in the state Final Four.

The situation looked even more worrisome for the Big Reds in the state semifinals, played this year at Calvin College in Grand Rapids.

They squared off against a talented team from Southfield Arts and Technology, and had a terrible first half. They misfired badly from the floor in the first quarter, hitting only 1 of 18 shots, and weren't much better in the second, converting 4 of 12 attempts.



Above, Alyza Winston pulls up for a jumper; Below, the Big Reds bench celebrates a big moment. Photos/Jason

The Big Reds also had eight turnovers in the first half, and trailed 13-2 after one quarter and 29-13 at halftime. Pretty much everyone figured it was over for Muskegon.

But again the Big Reds fought back, opening the fourth quarter with an 11-2 run over the first four minutes to pull within four points, 46-42. Winston led the uprising with five points, Day added four and Brianna Alexander sank a pair of free throws.

Muskegon trailed 52-44 with under three minutes left when it made its final move to complete the comeback.

Southfield still led 52-47 with 1:50 left, and with no shot clock in play, held the ball for 39 seconds before being fouled and going to the line for a 1-and-1.

But the Warriors were called for a lane violation on the first free throw with 1:11 remaining, giving the Big Reds the ball and

another opportunity.

Dashonna Day nailed a triple with 51 seconds left, making the score 52-50, then Southfield turned the ball over on its next possession when a player stepped out of bounds.

Then came "the call."

Muskegon went for the game-tying shot, and Winston drove the lane for a layup, but was called for travelling with 16 seconds remaining. Replays on a television monitor on the sideline noted contact with a defender, and it appears Winston might have been fouled on the play, but the travel call stood and Southfield got the ball back.

The Big Reds were forced to foul after that, and Southfield's Soeil Barnes hit two free throws with six seconds left to seal a 54-50 victory and snuffed out Muskegon's season.

"Of course, I'm going to think differently," Muskegon Coach Rodney Walker said about the call. "I thought she got bumped and he called a travel. Either way it goes, one call doesn't decide a game and I don't want to get into that. It was one of those calls I wish would've went our way."

Despite the stunning defeat, the Big Reds had a great deal to be proud of.

They finished with a 21-5 record, and won the O-K Black Conference championship and district and regional titles along the way. The run to the semifinals was the farthest the Big Red girls have ever advanced in the state tournament.

While the team had lots of valuable players, its driving force was Winston, one of the state's top seniors, who will play at Michigan State University next year.

Winston started the tournament slowly and was a bit off in districts, when she only totaled 11, 13 and 16 points in the three games.

But then she caught fire, scoring 34 points in the regional opener against East Kentwood, leading Muskegon to a 67-46 win. She totaled 28 in the regional final against Hudsonville, a 65-39 victory.

She also scored 27 points in the quarterfinal victory over DeWitt, and 25 points against Southfield Arts and Technology in the state semifinals.

In the process she displayed all of her skills - her amazing speed and acceleration, dazzling moves while driving the lane and weaving through traffic, and her outside shooting ability.

"I think she has a whole other level, a whole other gear," Coach Walker said. "It's really hard to stop her from getting down the floor with her speed, which is really the most unique part of her game."

ANOTHER MAGIC RUN FOR LUDINGTON

and this one was a real shocker

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

It happened again, for the second time in three years.

The Ludington boys basketball team stunned everyone by advancing all the way to the state Final Four once again.

It was easier to fathom back in 2017, when the Orioles upset River Rouge in the state semifinals, then gave New Haven a fight before falling in the state championship game. That team, while lacking height and star power, was 18-2 in the regular season, so its Cinderella run through the tournament was not so unthinkable.

It was much harder to explain the 2019 Orioles, because they weren't very successful in the regular season at all.

They posted a 9-10 record, but it was even worse than that. Ludington finished the regular season with five losses in their last six games.

There was a 54-47 loss to North Muskegon, a 55-50 loss to Muskegon Catholic, a 51-43 loss to Muskegon Heights, a 33-31 loss to Western Michigan Christian, and a 55-53 loss to Orchard View.

Sandwiched in that slew of defeats was a 68-40 win over Mason County Central.

All in all, Ludington seemed like a team out of gas, more than ready for a quick exit from the tournament.

But that didn't happen, because their old March Madness magic struck again.

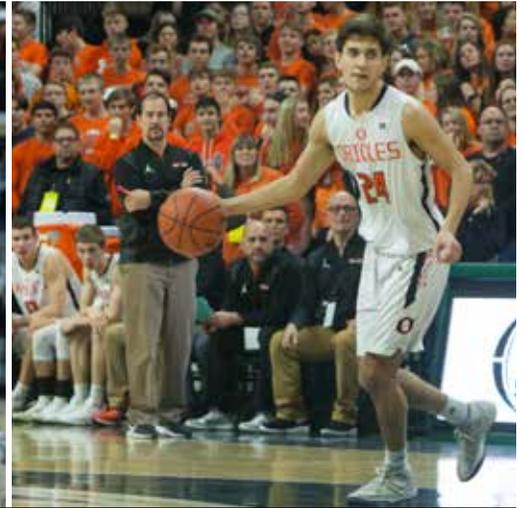
The Orioles popped back to life with a 56-44 victory over Reed City in the district semifinals, then beat Cadillac 35-29 in the district championship game.

In their regional tournament at Cadillac High School, they downed Sterling Standish 50-40 in the semifinals, then beat Escanaba 49-32 in the finals.

Their final victory was an amazingly easy 65-32 win over Alma in the Division 2 state quarterfinals at Mount Pleasant High School. Alma entered the game with only three losses on the season, and seemed like a solid favorite.

But the Panthers learned, like everyone else, that Ludington is a very dangerous opponent at tournament time. And the Orioles seemed to be particularly deadly when everyone counted them out.

"I think we're just playing with a lot of confidence right now, with a little bit of a swagger," said longtime Ludington Coach Thad Shank after the state quarterfinal win. "We've got nothing to lose. When you're



Jake Plamondon dribbles past an opponent in the state semis; at right, Sam Bandstra sets up a play. Photo/Jason Goorman

9-10 and people doubt you, you can either close up shop and quit on the whole thing, or you can play with that nothing-to-lose attitude. That's what we've been doing."

Ludington relied on its trademark defense to get rolling in the tournament, holding opponents in their five victories to a miniscule average of 35.4 points per game.

In their district final victory, the Orioles held Cadillac scoreless in the third quarter. In their regional final victory, they held Escanaba to only 19 points through the first three quarters.

In their state quarterfinal win, Ludington held Alma to just five points in the pivotal third quarter.

"We take pride on the defensive end," Shank said after the quarterfinals. "If you come to our practices, you will be able to tell right away that's number one."

Scoring was definitely not a strength for Ludington during the regular season. Only one player averaged in double figures, and the second-highest scorer averaged around seven.

But even the offense perked up during the tournament run.

Senior Josh Laman, who gained statewide acclaim as a sophomore in 2017 for hitting a buzzer-beating triple in overtime in the state semifinals, was a steady scoring presence, recording 16, 14, 12, 14 and 15 points in the five tournament victories.

Others got into the act, as well. One was senior Nathan Lange, who had a career-high 19 points in the regional finals against Escanaba, and junior Riley Calhoun, who scored all eight of his points in the third quarter of the regional opener against

Sterling-Standish, sparking a 14-2 run that put the Orioles in control.

Ludington's offense was most impressive against Alma, when the Orioles put up 65 points with red-hot 61 percent shooting, including 10 three-pointers.

"When you see the ball go in the basket a few times, that helps your confidence and mentality a great deal," Shank said. "There were times during the regular season when we got some pretty good looks but had just a heck of a time putting the ball in."

Ludington's latest Cinderella run ended with an ugly 69-30 loss to eventual state champion Hudsonville Unity Christian in the state semifinals at Michigan State University's Breslin Center.

The Crusaders took control early with a 20-4 advantage after one quarter. They led 37-18 by halftime and 50-22 after three quarters.

Unity Christian shots the lights out all night, hitting 59 percent from the floor. That included 8 of 13 shots from three-point range, for 61 percent.

Ludington shot 33 percent from the floor and struggled with Unity Christian's aggressive defense, coughing the ball up 24 times.

Despite the hard loss at the end of the road, Shank and his players held their heads very high.

"In sports, when things are not going your way, there's always a lot of noise (from outsiders)," Shank said.

"These kids heard all those things, but each and every day they came to play, did what the coaches told them and continued to fight and claw."

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IRONMEN QB ALEX CARDER

Putting down roots...



but keeping the dream alive

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Some Western Michigan University football fans might be surprised to learn that one of their old star quarterbacks, Alex Carder, is still putting up big numbers, seven years after he graduated.

The latest example came in a game on March 30, when Carder threw six touchdown passes, ran for three scores, caught a touchdown pass, and even kicked four extra points for the West Michigan Ironmen, Muskegon's arena football team, in a 68-6 victory over Indianapolis.

And a lot of Ironmen fans might be surprised to learn that Carder, the only starting quarterback in team history, still has much bigger football aspirations.

Despite the fact that he will be 30 this year, is married with a good daytime job in Grand Rapids, and is in his fourth season with the Ironmen, Carder still dreams of returning

to outdoor football at a higher professional level.

As he points out, 30 really isn't that old for a pro quarterback, particularly when you look at two of the great ones - Tom Brady, who is 41 and a six-time Super Bowl champion, and Drew Brees, who is 40 and led his team to the NFC title game this season.

While he loves certain aspects of the arena game, and very much loves playing for the Ironmen, Carder is not ready to call Muskegon his final football destination.

"I miss the outdoor game that I grew up playing," said Carder, who has been the starting quarterback for the Ironmen since they first took the field in 2016. "You can't play football forever, but I see some of these guys playing into their 40s, and it does nothing but inspire me. I still think I have what it takes to play at the highest level."

So what would that higher level be? Carder was eyeing Alliance of American Football, a new spring outdoor league with teams in major markets, national television exposure, and a lot of players who had the talent to push for NFL jobs.

But that league folded this spring, midway through its first season, and there are not a lot of other options out there for a pro quarterback looking for his break at the age of 29.

Carder says he will keep his eyes open, and jump when and if an opportunity presents itself.

"I'll reach out to people when the time is right," he said. "I will throw my name in the hat and see what happens. That's all you can do."

Compromise between career and home

A lot of people thought Carder might have the tools to play in the National Football League a few years ago, after he wrapped up a prolific college football career in 2012.

Carder was a three-year starter at Western Michigan University, and put up some pretty impressive numbers in his sophomore and junior seasons.

In 2010, as a sophomore, he completed 289 of 458 passes for 3,334 yards and 30 touchdowns. He was even better in 2011, when he completed 330 of 502 attempts for 3,873 yards and 31 touchdowns.

In one game against the University of Toledo in 2011, he threw for 548 yards (a new WMU single-game record) and seven touchdowns (a new Mid-American Conference record).

Carder missed part of his senior season due to a finger injury, but even then, he was considered a potential NFL prospect.

NFL.com wrote the following about Carder in his draft profile: "If teams are willing to look past his senior season, and if Carder performs well enough in the postseason process, he could be a late-round pick."

He wasn't selected in the NFL draft. He was signed as an un-



restricted free agent by the Detroit Lions in 2013, but was released a few months later. He also had tryouts at different times with the Chicago Bears, Pittsburgh Steelers, Green Bay Packers, Kansas City Chiefs and Cincinnati Bengals, but never stuck with a team.

So Carder turned to high-scoring arena football, with its 8-on-8 format playing on a 50-yard field, to continue to develop his skills and gain the attention of NFL scouts.

He had short stints with several arena teams over the next few seasons, including the Iowa Barnstormers, Nashville Venom, Jacksonville Sharks and Portland Thunder. He also had a stay with Ottawa of the Canadian Football League.

He even played one season as the backup quarterback and kicker for an arena football team in China.

But in the meantime, the Kansas native found himself putting down roots in Western Michigan. He made Grand Rapids his home a few years after college, got a very good job in the medical equipment industry, and settled down with his college girlfriend, Anina Cicerone, who he married last year.

"She was the captain of the women's soccer team at Western, and I was the captain of the football team," Carder said with a laugh. "We have a pretty stereotypical marriage."

With all of that going on his life, the idea of having a nearby professional team to play for was appealing for Carder, and that opportunity presented itself when the Ironmen formed in Muskegon in 2016.



The part-time nature of his Ironmen experience - practicing no more than once or twice a week - has allowed him to keep a hand in the game while attending to the rest of his life.

"I was back (in Grand Rapids) for a bit and gearing up for

my next challenge, when one of my old WMU teammates' dads mentioned the new team," Carder said. "I was planning on taking off and playing somewhere, but I had to weigh my options. Being available to go anywhere was kind of tough when you are hoping to start a family."

Carder has been a standout for the Ironmen since then, and recently returned for his fourth season in Muskegon. And while he still has thoughts about being a late bloomer in outdoor pro football, he admits that he's grown very attached to the Ironmen and their fans.

"It's the hometown team - that's why I feel especially invested," Carder said. "We've kind of been through it all together, and I love to be part of it all.

"It's about more than just me playing football at this point. I've built connections with fans, a few in particular, who are there every game, and come up and talk to me after every game. I know them all by name, and it's fun to watch their kids grow up.

"I'm still hungry and still want to play at the highest level, but I've been so fortunate to be able to call West Michigan home."

Riding the rapids with the Ironmen

Carder has literally rode the rapids with the Ironmen as they have struggled to gain stability in the topsy-turvy world of professional arena football.

On the field the team has been quite successful.

The Ironmen had a 20-11 all-time record at the time of this writing. In their first season in 2016, they advanced all the way to a league championship game before losing. Last season they went undefeated and won a league championship.



The success comes from a type of roster stability that's rare in arena football. This year the team had about a dozen players returning from their 2018 squad, including Carder and four others who have been around all four years.

The team has also caught on with fans, with estimated attendance of 1,500 to 2,000 at just about every home game over the past four years.

"I think we're real comfortable with each other, more than anything," Carder said. "We've grown to know each other, and grown to know where each other are going to be, and what each of us can do, in any moment of the game."

But the team has not been able to stick with one league for more than one season, due to various factors, and some of their experiences in different leagues have not been good.

Last year, for instance, the Ironmen moved to the Midwest Professional Indoor League, went 5-0 and won the championship. But the competition was weak, and they outscored their opponents by a combined 344-134.

This year the Ironmen entered the American Indoor League, an East Coast-based league that formed a new Midwestern Division this season. But the jury is still out on the quality of the teams.

They have had two league games so far, and one was a 68-6 victory over Indianapolis. That followed a season-opening 95-0 win over an Illinois squad that is not part of the league.

They did play one tough league game, against West Virginia on April 19, and lost 33-28. But they don't know at this point whether there will be other quality opponents on the schedule. A team from Louisville was not even in the league when the season started.

Carder and his teammates don't care very much what league they play in - but they know they are pretty good, and are hungry to test themselves against quality competition.

"It's a tough industry to be in with these leagues and finding teams to come in," said Carder, who admits that he does not have



a good understanding of the business side of the game, and how leagues are put together. "All I know is that we have a good core group of guys, and we want to play against better competition - anybody would.

"But you can only control what you can control. We just say that we'll just keep winning championships in these leagues and hopefully get noticed."

Carder's big game against Indianapolis in late March was a good example of his determination to keep playing at a high level, for himself and his team.

"That was a good time," he said. "We got a lot of opportunities and took advantage of them. We came ready to play. You don't ever want to play down to your competition. It's about you and what level you're playing at. This is what we do - it doesn't matter who's on the other side of the ball."

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