

Building Young People's Character in **Basketball** and in **Life**

An Interview with Dave Rohlman

Two free throws awarded on a technical foul would usually come as a welcome opportunity in a tight game. During a non-conference basketball game last February between DeKalb (Ill.) High School and Milwaukee Madison High School, however, the DeKalb team, including its coach, Dave Rohlman, had to be all but forced to take the shots they were owed.

Senior captain of the Milwaukee Madison Knights Johntel Franklin had lost his mother just hours earlier, after her five-year battle with cervical cancer. He arrived late to the game, intending just to watch and support his team from the stands. Franklin soon realized, however, that despite his grief, he wanted to play.

Coach Aaron Womack Jr. was happy to let Franklin play, though he had assumed Franklin would not be coming and so had left his name off the roster. Putting Franklin in the game would mean drawing a technical foul. Womack didn't mind sacrificing the points, but under the circumstances, Rohlman and his team didn't feel right about taking them. He pleaded with the referees, but they were insistent that DeKalb had to take the two free throws specified in the rulebook.

Senior captain Darius McNeal volunteered to take the shots. "You know you're going to miss them, don't you?" Rohlman asked the 5'11" point guard. McNeal nodded.

McNeal went to the line alone and lobbed the ball just a few feet—not once, but twice. As the ball rolled across the end line the second time, everyone in the arena rose to their feet, applauding this display of sportsmanship and character that has now inspired people nationwide. *Circuit Rider* spoke to Coach Rohlman about that memorable game and its implications for character development in young people today.

Did you know Darius was thinking the same thing you were—that he would intentionally miss the shots?

I didn't know until I asked, but when he volunteered, I turned toward him and I could tell when I looked at him that we were on the same page. Everybody was. Nobody rolled their eyes; nobody had any qualms about losing the points. That's pretty typical of this group of kids. I wasn't surprised at all.

What do actions like Darius' mean in our "win at all costs" society?

It puts things in perspective for kids. They watch professional sports on TV; they see games where one team beats another 100-0. There are so many opportunities they can get through athletics, being a part of a team, and that gets lost because kids are worried about getting a scholarship, or winning the championship. There are a lot of things you're learning about [through sports] that you don't recognize at the time that will get you through life by helping build the character and person you're going to be.

There has been so much interest in this story. With the



economy, especially, people need an outlet. Last thing people want to hear about is professional athletes who can't make good decisions. Thank goodness we can hear this story because there's so much we hear that is negative about sports.

What do you hope your team will remember about that night?

I hope they'll remember the relationships and friendships that have developed. We're way beyond basketball at this point. There's so much more than the score at the end of the game. Recently, both teams were invited up to a Milwaukee Brewers game, and Darius, Johntel, Coach Womack, and I all threw out first pitches. Our coaching staffs are planning to get together again in August.

Do you focus a lot on character and sportsmanship in your coaching?

Absolutely. We give sportsmanship awards at camp in the summer. When we start camp, we are saying this is the beginning of our season and it sets the tone and theme for the upcoming season.

What can coaches (and teachers, clergy, parents, etc.) do to help instill character in the young people they influence?

They need to continue to lead by example. We start with young kids [at basketball camp] and work to get our older kids to show our younger kids what we're talking about. It's one thing to preach discipline and talk about being of high character, but it's more important to live that out. It's one thing to hear it from me, but it's another to see the bigger kids out on the court. Get to those things early.

Coach Womack and I have talked about how we hope our kids who go into teaching or coaching (several are talking about it) will carry that message forward. They probably won't become professional basketball players, but they can get out and take that message to twenty kids or however many kids they touch. Kids need to know there are a lot of opportunities out there and if you're doing the right thing, people are going to notice. □