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Towns County High School 2017-18 Basketball Season wrap-up

By Jerry Kendall
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In closing out information about the 2018 season for the Lady Indians and Indians, several facts and observations hopefully of interest to readers will be provided in the following paragraphs.

Time to Say Goodbye

Perhaps the most difficult moment for any athlete at the high school or other levels of play is the realization that their career at that level has come to an end. The recent Region 8A Tournament games against Athens Christian at Commerce marked the final appearances for Lady Indian senior Madison McClure and Indian seniors Bradley Benson, Evan Berrong, Caleb Clark, Logan Cowart, Zach Davenport, and Cole Ledford.

Much appreciation is extended to these student athletes who have provided countless hours of hard work in serving their teams on the basketball court while coming up through the ranks in representing their various recreation, middle school, and high school teams. In reality, the often intense action fans see on the court during games represents just a tiny percentage of the time and effort to achieve various accomplishments along with much time and monetary expense required for their families for many years, including prior to their high school careers.

Individual and team accomplishments have been addressed at length for each of these players during their careers in articles in the Towns County Herald with these articles being available in the archives on the newspaper's website at: www.townscountyherald.net for those who would like to pursue viewing the coverage of some quite notable accomplishments.

As is often the case at TCHS, Lady Indian and Indian players have relatives who have established themselves as top notch athletes and it has become a tradition to mention some of the exploits of some of the top performers related to the graduating players. Second generation players often see action for the Lady Indians and Indians and this year we had three Indians being third generation TCHS basketball players with Berrong, Davenport, and Ledford fitting this category.

Evan Berrong's grandfather, Dwight Berrong, was a vital starting senior member of the Indians' 1966 team which missed by a single point being the school's first sports state tournament participant when just eight teams, two each from just four regions, made it to the state tournament compared to as many as thirty two teams from eight regions and now twenty four in Class A Public competition since that time.

That 1966 team, which compiled a unique 17-12-1 record with a tie game included, defeated Union County in overtime in the semifinals of the sub-region tournament at Rabun Gap with Kyle Moss, the great uncle of current Indians freshman standout Kolby Moss, scoring twenty points and William Dyer, the great uncle of 2017 Indians star Will De Vries, scoring the winning basket. They finished second to East Fannin, when Dwight Berrong scored thirty one points for the Indians, in the sub region tournament finals before defeating state ranked Lovett of Atlanta in the first round of the Region 8A Tournament.

The Indians then faced state ranked Oconee County in Oconee's home court in the region semifinals where they fell by just a 51-50 score with Oconee going on to finish second in the state to Waynesboro. Evan's father, Darren, was then an outstanding basketball player whose career was unfortunately limited by back problems before graduating from TCHS in 1993.

Cole Ledford's grandfather, Rex Norton, was a vital member as a starting senior guard on the 1964 Indians team which compiled an outstanding 24-6 record, one of the top Indians records in school history, against a very challenging schedule. Included in the outstanding



Both Towns County squads celebrating during their victories over Hayesville, NC at the 2017 Battle of the States Christmas Tournament. Photos/Lowell Nicholson and Todd Forrest

record was winning the championship in a Union County Christmas invitational tournament. The Indians defeated Rabun County 61-42 and East Fannin 58-57 in winning the Christmas tournament with Rex scoring twelve points in the East Fannin victory.

Those were days when the TCHS teams were able to complete their schedule without leaving the nearby Rabun, Union, Fannin, Gilmer, Lumpkin, White, and Habersham Counties in Georgia and Clay and Cherokee in North Carolina with no private schools included. Most every public Georgia school the Towns teams faced during this and other seasons in those days were significantly larger but not nearly as large as most of them are today.

The wins over Rabun County and East Fannin in the Union County tournament proved to be unique as they were the only wins for the Indians over these two teams during the season as they fell in three close games to East Fannin, including by a 58-51 score in the sub-region tournament following a 65-47 first round win over Rabun Gap, and lost two regular season games to Rabun County along with a home court defeat in overtime to Lumpkin County.

Rex figured prominently as the Indians avenged the overtime loss to Lumpkin when both high powered offensive teams played a slow down type game at Lumpkin, seemingly out of respect for their opponent's scoring talents, with Rex sinking the winning basket in a hard fought 31-30 Indians victory. The win over Lumpkin assured the Indians of having at least one win over every opponent they faced that year. They finished with just a 3-6 record against the outstanding East Fannin, Rabun County, and Lumpkin County teams but with a 21-0 record against all other opponents, including four decisive wins over Union County.

Cole's mother, Penny Norton Ledford, completes the three generation participation for the family as she served as a prominent starting member of two Lady Indians teams as a junior and senior through the 1992 season with a highlight being when she rose to the occasion of a career night with twenty eight points scored in a 67-45 win over Rabun Gap during her senior season.

Detailed coverage has already been provided about the successes of Zach Davenport's mom, Jacklyn Welch Davenport, and her parents, Ricky and Doris Moss Welch, at TCHS during coverage of Zach's scoring his 1,000th career point in the regular season opening game with this information available in the Towns County Herald Archives on the Internet. As a follow up to the information presented at that time, Zach wound up with 545 points this season for a career total of 1,542 and adding the total of 1,670 points scored by his mom and her parents gives the three generations family a career points total of 3,212.

Extensive coverage of Zach's remarkable scoring totals has been provided but your reporter would like to provide information about his

excellent success this year in assisting his teammates on field goals. As unofficially tallied by your reporter, he totaled 117 assists for an average of 4.5 per game with 34 being on treys in having a hand in 268 points in addition to the 545 he scored.

Although not in the parent or grandparent category, Logan Cowart's sister, Kellsie, was a prime time player for three years for the Lady Indians varsity through the 2014 season with the Lady Indians making the state tournament all three years and including region championships in 2012 and 2013. A very memorable highlight for Kellsie was her sinking the winning basket as time expired as a junior in the Lady Indians' 45-43 home court victory over Claxton getting them into the state final four in 2013.

Many thanks are extended from the Towns County Herald and this reporter to seniors Madison McClure, Bradley Benson, Evan Berrong, Caleb Clark, Logan Cowart, Zach Davenport, and Cole Ledford for their many hours of dedicated and highly regarded service to their school and teams and best wishes are extended to each of them for the future.

All Region Selections – The 2018 8-A All-Region Basketball Teams were recently announced with three Lady Indians and one Indian receiving recognition. Lady Indian senior Madison McClure was chosen for the five member girls second team while junior Taylor Cornett and freshman Vanessa Floyd were among twenty one players receiving honorable mention recognition.

Indians senior Zach Davenport received recognition on the five member first team in boys competition while for some reason, just eight honorable mention recognitions beyond first and second teams were chosen with no potential Indian players being included for recognition in this small number.

Congratulations are extended to Madison, Taylor, Vanessa, and Zach for these well deserved recognitions.

What Might Have Been – Your reporter has often mentioned during this season, just as last year with the nearly complete season loss to the Indians of senior Adam Barrett to injury, the effect on the success of the Towns County teams of the extended loss of playing time due to injury to Lady

Indians freshman Kennedy Henson and Indians senior Logan Cowart.

The vital presence of the scoring of points usually receives most of the attention in reporting of games and past accomplishments of players and teams, primarily because points are the only statistic required for determining winners of games and therefore the only stats consistently retained by most teams through the years so the extended effect of the loss of points from Henson and Cowart will be addressed first.

Successful teams are usually well aware of the scoring capabilities of their opponents with defensive focus



usually aimed at players who have shown a strong ability to put points on the scoreboard. The more weapons a team has in its offensive arsenal, the more difficult it is for the opposing team to defensively cover the other players, leaving more scoring opportunities for each player.

The loss of Henson's team leading 13.0 points per game scoring average and Cowart as the second leading scorer for his team with 15.1 points per game at the time of their injuries provide unfortunate emphasis to this point for their teams with the need for defensive focus on Henson and Cowart by opposing teams no longer present.

But basketball is so much a team game such as, for example, when a strong defensive play preventing points by an opponent contributes just as much to a team's chance for a victory as points scored by the team. Examples of crucial additional talents include such stats as assists, rebounds, blocked shots, and steals along with the vital contributions of strong ball handling and team defensive strategies.

The facts that Henson easily led her team in assists and Cowart easily led his in rebounds along with their providing differing duties related to their differing positions on the playing court, this factor could be no more true than when losing players with the physical size and talents of these players.

Your reporter mentioned more than once prior to Henson's injury that the mostly youthful Lady Indians appeared ready for great success in region play after Christmas as a result of admirable and increasing success against a quite challenging schedule against mostly much larger public schools and two very decisive region wins over Providence Christian and Tallulah Falls in the only two region games played by the team prior to Christmas.

Enough could not be stated about the Lady Indians' very successful team defensive strategies of using pressure defense all over the court as a countering measure for their disrupting the strategies of usually significantly taller opponents, even prior to the loss of Henson as their tallest and physically strongest player even as a freshman.

Additional losses to the Lady Indians in Henson's absence included the availability of the sharing of ball handling duties by Senior Madison McClure and Henson as the two leading scorers with the one not handling the ball able to work toward a scoring opportunity along with the likelihood of increasing scoring and rebounding potential for the youthful Henson with increasing experience at the varsity level.

The loss of Cowart was no less devastating to the Indians without his 6'4" presence and athleticism under the basket, not only represented by his scoring and easily being the team leader in rebounds but especially as related to his defensive rebounding preventing put-back baskets along with his shot blocking ability with the resulting factor of

opposing players altering and missing shots due to fear of having them blocked or avoiding challenging him on drives to the basket.

With the effect of contributions lost other than the scoring points hard to fully determine, simply looking at the effect of the loss of points by Henson and Cowart in games following their injuries provides food for thought to consider as to "what might have been" for the Lady Indians and Indians.

The Lady Indians lost twelve games following Henson's injury with eight of the twelve being by fewer than the thirteen points she was averaging at the time of the injury and five of those eight losses by between just three and seven points. And in three of seven games lost by double digits, the Lady Indians trailed by no more than six points during fourth quarter action, by nine late in another, and by just ten entering the fourth quarter in a fifth.

As for the Indians, they lost eleven games following Cowart's injury, including the last one with Cowart participating but for a limited time period and at just a fraction of full strength after seven weeks of athletic inactivity, with four of the eleven losses being by less than his 15.1 points per game average at the time of the injury and including three by five or fewer points.

In conclusion as related to this "what might have been" issue but especially as related to the effect on the teams' standings in Region 8A, injuries are an unfortunate part of any game but maybe it is understandable for the Lady Indians and Indians and their followers to feel a bit snake bitten by having three devastating injuries occur in two years back to Adam Barrett last year and to Henson and Cowart this year.

Region 8-A Tournament – Mention was made within coverage of the Lady Indians and Indians struggling to put points on the scoreboard when eliminated by Athens Christian in the Region 8A Tournament that scoring woes turned out to be very common during the tournament, including among the teams featuring high powered scoring during regular season.

We will take a look at some of the surprises in the tournament not only as related to scoring woes for several teams but upsets as well. In girls play, the Athens Christian ladies fell on Tuesday following their 36-29 win on Monday over the Lady Indians to Lakeview Academy by a 44-23 score with the north sub region leader Lakeview then falling victim on Friday to Athens Academy, the number two seeded from the South by a 38-28 score. The Lady Indians and their followers may recall Athens Academy escaping with a 46-43 win over the Lady Indians in Hiwassee during their only regular season game.

Athens Academy had taken only a 43-40 win in their opening game over Hebron Christian, a team that pulled out just a 40-36 regular season win over the Lady Indians in Hiwassee when sinking five

of six free throws after benefiting by two ultra disputable calls during the final 1:04 of the game. Prince Avenue took a much easier route to the region finals by racing past Commerce by a 68-30 score and George Walton Academy by a 45-19 score before defeating Athens Academy by just a 38-31 score in the championship game.

At the end of the girls region tournament, nine games had been played with eight of the losing teams having scored thirty one or fewer points with Hebron Christian's aforementioned 43-40 loss to Athens Academy representing the only occasion of a losing team exceeding thirty one points. Three winning teams scored just thirty eight or fewer points while three additional winning teams did not exceed forty five points in victory.

In boys play, Athens Christian followed their 53-40 win over the Indians with a loss by a similar score of 55-40 to Lakeview Academy the following night but the normally high flying Lakeview, the number one seed from the north sub-region who had gone a perfect 15-0 in regular season in region play, fell to Athens Academy 44-40 in the semi finals of the tournament on Friday. Indians fans will perhaps recall that the Indians used a 48-28 advantage the last half over Athens Academy in Hiwassee in rallying from a halftime deficit of 28-23 for a 71-56 conquest.

The region champion Prince Avenue boys, who were the top seeded team from the south sub-region, defeated Riverside Military Academy 57-41 in their first round game and George Walton Academy 60-48 in the semi-finals of the tournament before taking a razor thin 40-38 win over Athens Academy in the championship game.

At the end of the boys region tournament, ten games had been played with seven of the losing teams scoring forty two or fewer points and seven of the winning teams not exceeding fifty nine points. Easily the highest scoring game for both teams was a 70-67 win by George Walton Academy over Hebron Christian with the Indians the only other team above sixty points in a game in the tournament in their opening 69-49 win over the host team Commerce.

Some would probably summarize their team's scoring difficulties in the region tournament as being the result of an off night while others, such as the winning teams, might give credit to successful defensive strategies but there is a strong likelihood that both factors probably contributed in most instances of low scoring games, including in those when both teams struggled to score points.

It is very plausible to speculate the possibility of region championships for both the Lady Indians and Indians when considering the "what might have been" evaluation had the Lady Indians retained the services of Kennedy Henson and the Indians the services of Logan Cowart along with the very improbable boys and girls region tournament results provided above.