

Rumson and Holmdel team up for unforgettable moment

His name is Matty Newman, and he's the unmistakable leader of the Rumson-Fair Haven boys basketball team.

The senior, known by his nickname "Matty Cools," inspires the team each day with his words and enthusiasm in the locker room, during practice and in games.

Newman, who is autistic, is Rumson's team manager. But during a recent home game against Holmdel, he was a whole lot more. He suited up and started, and in doing so, he gave an unforgettable, inspirational lesson to everyone in the gym, including the visiting team.

The plan, which had been building throughout the season, was for Matty to start on Senior Day. Rumson coach Chris Champeau spoke with Holmdel coach Sean Devaney beforehand, who then explained the story to his own team. The Holmdel players, in a true showing of sportsmanship, were all in on giving "Matty Cools" a chance to not just play, but experience an extra-special thrill by scoring a basket. The best part is that it not only went off without a hitch, but helping a rival team gave the Holmdel players an experience that they too will never forget.

Here's how it happened: Holmdel had possession after the opening tip. Hornets guard Drew Pollock had the ball near mid court, where he allowed Matty to steal the ball. Matty, employing a drive toward the hoop that he's practiced all season, missed his initial attempt, but a teammate collected the rebound, and passed back to Matty, who then scored. What followed was pure bedlam. As the crowd in the gym roared, the Holmdel players looked on with smiles and applause while the entire Rumson team mobbed Matty and then lifted him triumphantly off the court on their shoulders.

The scene epitomized the essence of sportsmanship, and is worthy of a salute during NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Week, which is sponsored by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy, and runs through Feb. 12.

"It was a moment I'll never forget," Holmdel's Pollock said. "There's stuff that's bigger than basketball, and this was one of those moments. It was really cool. It was a turnover that I would make time and time again if I could choose. Playing sports growing up, your parents and your coaches tell you to respect other teams, but obviously, this was a different kind of respect, and I was glad to be a part of it. Especially at the varsity level, teams are competing hard, and they want to win more than anything else. While basketball means a lot to many people, there's also stuff that is more important, and that was one of those moments."

Devaney, the Holmdel coach, was thrilled that his team could participate in such an experience.

"Our kids are good kids, and it was great for them to be a part of it," he said. "You go over there, you know how good Rumson is, and you're so focused on what can we do to win the game. Then you go through something like that, and it really brings you back to 'Okay, this game isn't as important as we make it out to be.' There are more important things, and this obviously was one of them. We lost the game, but our kids really got something out of it. They'll remember it forever. They also saw what Rumson did for one of their own, and maybe someday one of our guys will be in a position to do an act like that for someone else."

And at Rumson, the entire school population has learned similar lessons from having Matty as part of their team and community.

"We try to do Sportsmanship Week every week," Rumson coach Champeau said. "We have a thing called 'Tradition Never Graduates,' and for us, Matty has been a huge part of the tradition, and the guys love him so much that it just manifests itself. It wasn't just a big show that day. They've treated him like that his whole life. It's a beautiful thing to watch. And Holmdel, they were a class act in all of it."

It was so good, in fact, that because of what happened that day, along with how well they've played, Rumson was given a "Team of the Week" award that carries a prize of sub sandwiches. The Bulldogs voted to give that prize to the players from Holmdel.

"It was surreal; it was probably one of the biggest moments of Matty's life, and to experience that with him was a big deal for us as a team," said Rumson senior Scott Gyimesi. "Holmdel also did a great job. Coach Devaney is a guy with a lot of classes; the team had a lot of classes, too. You could see them clapping when Matty scored. You could tell that they were all-around a good group."

As for Matty himself, the moment was a dream come true.

"It felt really good," he said. "It was outstanding. After I hit that bucket, I gave my whole entire team a hug because they are my friends."

