

Belleville gets help from arch-rival Nutley to hold senior Night

It didn't take long for Belleville basketball senior Ethan Laquindanum to know that his final season was going to be challenging at best, and difficult at worst. That's because the gym at his school, the one he figured to spend so many hours in during the course of the year, was severely damaged by flooding when the remnants of Hurricane Ida swept through just as school was opening in early September. It quickly became clear that Belleville's indoor teams would have no home gym to compete in for the year.

"We knew from the first day of school," the captain said. "I was sad. I wanted home games coming back from having no fans. It would have been special, but instead we've been on the road the whole time."

Being on the road doesn't just apply to games. On non-game days, the team practices on a shortened floor at a middle school. But it has persevered nicely, including wins in 10 of its first 15 games. Still, there are things that players deserve, especially ones who've dealt with the Covid crisis that began two years ago. One of those items is Senior Night, which put Belleville in an obvious bind. That was until the school received a boost from neighboring Nutley, which happens to be its oldest and biggest rival.

The teams were scheduled to play on Jan. 10, and Joe Piro, the Nutley athletic director, and Marcellino Marra, the AD at Belleville, came up with an interesting idea, which was to give Belleville the chance to hold a Senior Night ceremony at the home gym of its arch-rival. It's the type of gesture worthy of a salute during NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Week, sponsored by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy. The week, spotlighting examples of sportsmanship by schools and athletes throughout the state, runs through Feb. 12 on the NJSIAA website and social media platforms.

For Piro, the idea of helping out the athletes from his school's fiercest foe was an easy one.

"We may be rivals on the field, but we are neighbors and have long-standing relationships with their administration, coaches and players," he said. "They never say no to us and we never say no to them. They are a member of the Pizza Triangle (with Belleville and Bloomfield). That carries a lot of weight."

Piro also views it as something beyond the mere proximity of the schools. A greater concept is involved.

"Competition and sportsmanship are two different entities," he said. "There should always be a mutual respect and appreciation for competitors. Each athlete, regardless of the color of their jersey, does the same thing day in and day out to prepare themselves for competition. Therefore, it is necessary to respect and appreciate your opponent's efforts. There is nothing wrong with aggressively competing against each other between the lines and during the time allotted. That is the expectation. The sportsmanship piece comes in before, during, and after the competition and is driven by that mutual respect, appreciation and admiration for the efforts of your opponent. It is the same effort that you put in every day."

Marra, the Belleville AD who happens to be a Nutley graduate, was elated that his athletes were able to be recognized, and to also see the smiles on their faces as they were presented the customary gifts while posing for pictures with family and friends.

"It's amazing to me how both our boys and girls teams have handled being on the road," he said. "That's just a credit to our student-athlete's positive attitudes and our coaching staff. I told our coaches that if we make it an obstacle then the players will see it that way. Both teams are doing well and are continuing to progress. This week Abundant Life Academy also hosted a girls game for us against St Vincent Academy that was our Senior Night, which was another great gesture by our neighbors. Luckily, we have great neighbors who know the meaning of sportsmanship and I can't thank them enough."

Neither can the Belleville players, who truly had a night to remember at Nutley, especially since it won 55-54 in overtime during the game that preceded the Senior Night ceremony.

"That was a good game, it was very competitive and thank you to Nutley for having us," Laquindanum, the Belleville point guard, said. "It was really special. Having my friends and family come and support, it was just a really good day. Nutley is our rival, but they came through to help us out."

And in a season that's been full of lessons related to adversity, it was another to add to that list.

"We won both Senior Night games, but in the end we taught a more valuable lesson than winning to our kids," Marra said.

"Sportsmanship and helping people is more important than the game. One day you may need help, so open your doors for those who need it. My first year as an AD, when Nutley had an issue with hosting the districts in wrestling, we hosted for them without hesitation. Five years later it was us that needed help and they did not hesitate to help us. It is bigger than a rivalry, it is a mutual respect. Our kids model after what we do and I have to say that the role models at Abundant Life Academy, Nutley, and Belleville are second to none. I am proud to work with such great professionals.

"Sports teach life lessons and I believe the lessons learned this year about sportsmanship, hospitality, perseverance, persistence, and respecting your opponents are lessons that last a lifetime," Marra said. "I am so proud of our teams. A special thank you to both Abundant Life and Nutley for working together with us to teach our communities these valuable lessons."

Belleville Seniors



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