

Mainland displays sportsmanship by reaching out to injured Sparta athlete



This was supposed to be a special senior basketball season for Brynn McCurry of Sparta.

After leading the Spartans to the NJSIAA Group 3 state championship last year, earning All-State recognition and then signing a letter of intent with Villanova, her presence was expected to make the Sussex County team a strong threat to repeat, and she also figured to re-set the school and county record books for scoring and more after averaging 20.6 points, 9.1 rebounds and 5.8 assists as a junior.

All that changed during her team's final scrimmage in December, when McCurry suffered an injury that turned out to be a torn ACL in her left knee.



Brynn McCurry of Sparta in action against Mainland in the 2022 Group 3 state final (Photo by Andrew Mills/NJ.com)

She underwent surgery to repair the damage in early January. While she expects to be ready to compete at Villanova in the fall, the high school phase of her career is over.

“The timing of it is unfortunate, but I’ll be back for college,” McCurry said. “It’s tough to lose my senior year playing with my friends. We looked forward to so many things. But I still get to be a part of the team, come to all the games and support my best friends.”

While the performance portion of high school won’t end the way she wanted, the season is turning out to be special in other ways. Most notably, from the concern and well-wishes she’s received from not just those closest to her, but also from opposing teams, players and coaches, as well as others on the basketball scene.

“It was crushing,” she said. “It was hard at first just accepting all the things I was going to miss. But I have such a great support system that it helped me to get through it.”

The goodwill from fellow teams in the Northwest Jersey Athletic Conference was no real surprise, since the league is comprised of many good people.

Westfield, the defending Group 4 champ who Sparta defeated in the first round of last year’s Tournament of Champions, also went out of its way to offer well-wishes at a recent rematch.

And one day in early January, Sparta coach Catherine Wille came upon an unexpected envelope in her school mailbox, something that’s also worthy of a salute as part of the NJSIAA Sportsmanship Appreciation Series, presented by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy.

It was addressed from Mainland Regional High School in Linwood, roughly 150 miles away in Atlantic County.

Mainland was the team that Sparta defeated in last year's Group 3 state final. McCurry's play resonated with them that day, so much so that when they learned of her injury, Mustangs' head coach Scott Betson and his players knew that they had to reach out.

As a result, they sent a card that was not only signed by all, but contained messages of encouragement from each of the players.

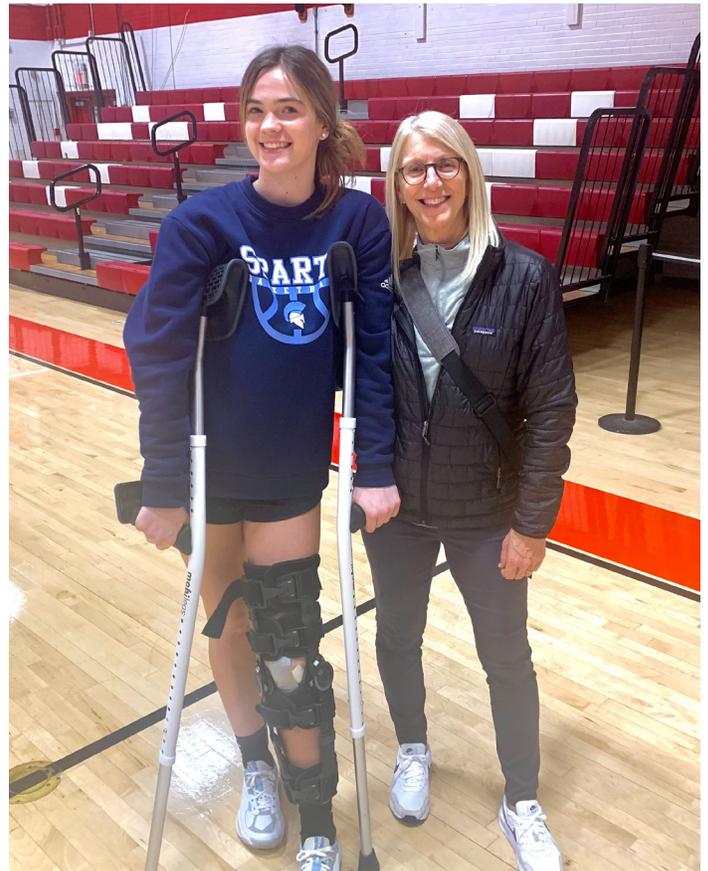
"They mailed it to the school in care of me," Wille said. "Everyone on the team not only signed it, they wrote a personal note. They really did their research. It was very cool."

"We crossed paths with her and Sparta last year in the state final and she was obviously a special player," Betson said. "They dominated us in that game, but our team walked away really impressed with how Brynn, and really all of Sparta, conducted themselves. We also have a group of players who are really dedicated to basketball, so when someone experiences an injury like that, we can all empathize with the situation. We just wanted to express that we were sad for her, but also looking forward to seeing her at the next level when she gets healthy again."

The timing couldn't have been any better. The card arrived soon after the surgery, and rather than do it herself, Wille had her players be the ones to pass along the card to McCurry. It created a happy scene.

"It came about three days after the surgery," McCurry said. "My friends stopped by after practice and gave it to me. It was just an incredible thing to do. They're so far away, we played them in the states, and I don't know any of those girls personally. But just to know that they cared for me like that is so amazing."

McCurry's injury wasn't her first during 2022. She suffered a severe ankle sprain which caused her to miss most of the state tournament, and then come off of the bench during the state final and Tournament of Champions, which included the win



Brynn McCurry with Sparta coach Catherine Wille over Westfield.

"She missed seven games and rehabbed the heck out of it and got back for the right moments," Wille recalled. "That's who she is. She's an amazing kid."

"We came into that game knowing what a special talent Brynn is, and we knew that she had been battling an ankle injury," Betson said. "The truth is, Sparta didn't need Brynn to beat us that day, they were already in control when she checked in. However, her talent and ability were still obvious and it took them to another level. Even then, we were happy for her to be able to play in that game with her friends, because we all understand how important that must have been for her to experience that."

It was also important for the Mainland players to relay their well-wishes this year to a fellow player.

"I remember going on Twitter the night Brynn got injured and seeing multiple tweets about it," said Mainland junior Ava Mazur, whose twin sister Bella also plays for the team. "I immediately told my sister and we texted Coach Betson. We were all in

shock and felt so sad for her. As a fellow basketball player, I could not imagine having my senior season taken away from me before it even started. I was aware of the severity of this injury and the amount of time it takes to recover from it. I know how much dedication, hard work and commitment it takes to be as successful as she was. The next day, walking into our film session, a blank card was laying on one of the desks. Coach Betson shared Brynn's story with the rest of the team and asked us to sign the card sending our best wishes. We were all in total agreement to offer this gesture in hopes that it would lift her spirits."

Reaching out was important to Bella Mazur.

"That state final game is still fresh in my mind," she said. "Although we suffered a loss, it was a great opportunity for our team and individually for us as sophomores. Sparta was well coached and played the game with intensity and skill. There is no doubt that Sparta plays the game right and they were great competitors. You could tell right away what kind of player Brynn is by her respect for the game and everyone involved."



Brynn McCurry exchanges salute with teammate Ally Sweeney at a recent game



Lastly, the gesture by Mainland shows the importance of sportsmanship. The team had no intention of gaining any publicity by reaching out. Word got out after McCurry and Sparta passed along their extreme thanks on social media.

"Sportsmanship is obviously important to us, and really all the programs here at Mainland," Betson said. "High School athletics are an extension of the school, so it stands to reason that athletes should be learning from their experiences in these activities. We believe that there are a host of things that athletes can learn from these opportunities, but sportsmanship is simultaneously the most important and easiest thing to stress. This card was a simple example of this. To sign and send the card only took a couple of minutes from our day, but it seems to have made an impact on Brynn in a positive way. That is what it's all about. She seems like a great kid and we wish the best."

Likewise, the sportsmanship component was also gratifying to both Ava and Bella, since it is something they've been taught to value during their time as athletes.

"Sportsmanship is competing with grit and a will to win," the sisters said. "But at the same time, respecting the game, opponents, referees, coaches and your teammates. We also believe that you can be an intense competitor on the court, but be kind, sincere and thoughtful off the court. Sportsmanship is so important to us, our team and school overall."