

# Kearny and University Charter share important sportsmanship lesson

When the Kearny boys basketball team played host to University Academy Charter of Jersey City on Jan. 10, the game did not end well.

A brief scuffle on the court early in the fourth quarter caused players to step off of their benches. The referees ended the game at that point, with Kearny holding a 49-30 lead. The resulting automatic ejections caused both teams to be disqualified from participating in the state tournament.

There was one other unique, and potentially problematic, issue which carried over after that night. The teams, members of the Hudson County Interscholastic Athletic League, were scheduled to play a second time, on Feb. 1 in Jersey City.

The administrations from the two schools, led by athletic directors Vincent Almeida of Kearny and Michele Bruce of University Charter, discussed how to handle the rematch.

Cancelling the game could have been an option. But instead, the schools played the contest as scheduled, and created a special afternoon and evening that won't be forgotten by those on either side.



It is all worthy of recognition as part of the NJSIAA Sportsmanship Series, which is presented by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy.

Before the rematch started, the athletic directors addressed both teams together. Players came forward, as well, with the University Charter captain even coming forth to apologize on behalf of his team.

The schools then played a clean game which Kearny won, 73-43. But when the final buzzer sounded, the Cardinals did not go home. Instead, they stayed for a dinner hosted by University Charter. The players ate together, bonded with each other, and even engaged in a dance contest with some singing mixed in. It ended with the student-athletes exchanging hugs and handshakes, and everyone leaving with valuable life lessons which won't be forgotten.

"After the incident between the two teams, I was working with Paul Popadiuk at NJSIAA, and creating an action plan to address the behavior of that evening," said Bruce. "We both felt that an organized approach and discussion was necessary to help the players understand the severity of their actions. One of the things that we put in place here was to meet



with the coach and the team as a whole to discuss what happened. I could tell that our players were still very upset about what happened and almost sad about it all, as was I.”

Almeida, the athletic director at Kearny, was also on board with the idea of turning the rematch into a teaching opportunity.

“The first game itself wasn’t overly physical,” he said. “Just in a moment, it unfortunately went from a normal game into a 20-second situation of chaos. In talking with Michele, we decided to play the second game. We talked with our team, and Michele talked with her team, and all of our kids had the right mentality. And thankfully we did play, because it turned out to be great. It was a good game, they were able to celebrate after and the kids got to see that everyone’s human, and that they are all out there trying to have a good time with their friends and enjoy sports and their high school experience while they can. It was a powerful thing. It was fantastic.”

The coaches of the two teams, Bill Mullins of Kearny and Marcus Robinson of University Charter, also agreed with the idea to both play the game and gather afterward.

But the most important people of all within the whole situation - the players - had to buy in, and they did.

Calvin Dickinson of University Charter is a senior guard and team captain.

“The first game, we didn’t want that to happen,” he said afterward. “We didn’t respect them on their home court. I had some doubts about playing them again, because I thought it might rekindle a bit, but at the end of it, we came in peace, we apologized, we gave each other high fives and we became friendly opponents. We had dinner together, we laughed, we talked, had conversations and had a great time.”

His points were echoed by junior teammate Abraham Davidson.

“That first game wasn’t what we are about,” he said. “Instead of being enemies, it was great to get together and talk. It was a lot of fun and it was a life



lesson.”

Jose Escalante, a senior forward from Kearny, at first wasn’t sure what to make of the second matchup.

“I was really suspicious of the game itself,” he said. “I didn’t believe we would participate in the game, and there would have been an issue if we had. The fact that we could all eat together and interact in the same place stood out on its own and remain in my memory for certain.”

The initial incident was unfortunately instigated by the actions of one University Charter player. So before the second game, Dickinson, in his role as captain showed great maturity by stepping forward to apologize on behalf of his team and school.

“I would say to anyone that I spoke with regarding the situation that the video (of the incident) was not indicative of the wonderful young men that I get to see every day,” Bruce said. “I also knew that everyone could benefit from a do-over, if possible.”

The only concession made for the rematch was playing without any fans. But everything else during the 32 minutes of play was normal. Still, it was important to do more, and create some important, lasting lessons.

“After thinking about that decision to play for a few days, I realized that simply playing game just didn’t seem like enough,” Bruce said. “I just kept thinking that if we really brought these teams together and sat them down, that they would realize that they all just love to play basketball and probably have much



more in common than they ever knew. I decided that I wanted to have a dinner that both teams would attend together. I knew that Coach Mullins and Mr. Almeida had done a great job instilling positive sportsmanship in their players. I also knew that our coach and I had been having many conversations about the incident and how to instill strong sportsmanship, too.

“Once I decided that we were going to play, I felt like we were going to go all in,” she said. “If we were going to bring the young men together to play, I wanted to make sure that we were going to see the best of these young men and that the night meant something to everyone involved. Once I shared the idea for the dinner, I was so happy because I received such positive feedback from both Mr. Almeida and his school as well as our team and administration.”

“It was great,” Almeida said. “It was a powerful thing we were able to see at University Charter in the cafeteria after. The interactions between the kids were fantastic. We also spoke about high school athletics and the importance of building different skills and character traits.”

The teams did more than just share a meal. They were also given a chance to bond, and they took full advantage.

“Honestly, watching all of these young men break the ice, cheer for one another, laugh and sing was far beyond anything I could have imagined,” Bruce said. “Young people are resilient and capable of great things, so sometimes we just have to set the stage for them to show us just that.”

The day also have the students a great lesson on sportsmanship.

“Respect for officials, rival players and coaches, as well as your own coaches and teammates, is what I consider to be good sportsmanship,” said Escalante.

“Sportsmanship means being a good person on and off the court, especially to your opponent,” Dickinson said. “You don’t show hate, you just be yourself, be nice, be kind and be positive. You may be going up against your opponents, but they are one of us and they are teenagers too, and you should be friendly toward them.”

One other nice thing happened that evening in Jersey City.

The original game night in Kearny, which was followed by a Kearny girls varsity contest, was also serving as a fundraising event to benefit cancer research in honor of Kearny senior William Mullins, who was the team’s top returning scorer and the son of the head coach. William has not played this year after being diagnosed with leukemia in the fall. As a show of respect toward the Mullins family, the University Charter team made a donation at that postgame gathering to the John Theurer Cancer Center at Hackensack University Medical Center on William’s behalf.

“That was very important to us,” said Dickinson, who collected funds around the school with his teammates. “We don’t take what he’s going through lightly. We take it heavy. He’s like one of us. At the end of the day, we are all brothers, and we pick each other up. If one of my teammates got sick, I’d want to help out as much as possible, and we all wanted to do something to help him.”