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SPORTS > HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

# Class A girls basketball: Coach commuted from Nebraska to coach team to state title

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A teary-eyed Kristi Fett made a plea to her coach following Lyle-Pacelli's Class A, Section 1 final loss to Goodhue last season in Rochester.

"She goes, 'You can't leave,'" Athletics coach Justin Morris recalled. "She cried right on my shoulder and she's like, 'You can't leave, we've got to go finish this.' ... I didn't know what to say, because I thought I was going to leave."

Morris' wife had taken a job in Nebraska, and he was going to follow. He got a job and the two now live in Omaha. Yet there Morris was Saturday, coaching top-seeded Lyle-Pacelli to a 57-33 victory over unseeded Sleepy Eye (28-5) in the Class A championship game at Target Center. The state title is the first of any kind for Pacelli, a private school in Austin. It's Lyle's first girls basketball state crown.

The Athletics (32-1) were led by Fett, a senior forward committed to play at Minnesota State Mankato, who finished with 30 points and 16 rebounds.

But to understand why Morris was on the sideline, you have to look at Lyle-Pacelli's recent history. The Athletics advanced to their first state tournament back in 2015, falling to eventual champion Ada-Borup in the semis by two points on a bucket in the final 10 seconds after leading by as many as 10 in the second half.

The following season, Lyle-Pacelli lost 44-43 to Goodhue in the section title game after leading by 13 at the half. Goodhue went on to win state.

“We’ve been so close,” Morris said. “We always joke like, ‘Hey, if you beat us, you’re going to win state.’ ”

Those defeats left a sense of unfinished business for Morris and his players. And this summer, when Lyle-Pacelli easily won a summer tournament featuring all of the state’s best Class A teams, Morris saw an opportunity to close the deal.

“I knew we were going to come back and we were going to give it everything we had,” Morris said.

He still moved to Omaha, but made the five-hour commute “too many” times back to Minnesota to coach the Athletics. Morris missed just a few games and coached 60 percent of the practices this season, staying with his mother in Austin when back in Minnesota. When Morris couldn’t be around, his uncle, Brad Walter — the current assistant and former head coach of the program — took the reins.

An odd setup? Sure. But also a successful one.

Saturday marked Morris’ final game as the Athletics’ coach. He came back because he “wanted to prove to the world that we were good enough to do it together.”

“All those heartbreaks, all those losses, we felt like we should’ve won. We felt like we let them get away,” Morris said. “We said, ‘We can do it. Give us one more shot together, one more shot together, and we can get this thing done.’ And we did.”

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## Jace Frederick

Jace has covered a slew of sports since he joined the Pioneer Press in May 2015, but his primary duty is covering high schools. Jace enjoys the beat, even though he’s been mistaken for a student on multiple occasions.

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