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Girls basketball: Morris, Athletics get their state title

By Pat Ruff pruff@postbulletin.com Mar 18, 2018 Updated Mar 19, 2018



Lyle/Pacelli star center Kristi Fett embraces a teammate after the Athletics beat Sleepy Eye 57-33 on Saturday in the Class A state championship at Target Center. Fett finished with 30 points, 16 rebounds and five blocked shots.

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MINNEAPOLIS — Justin Morris had to be talked into this.

His hesitation was beyond reasonable, considering he'd be faced with 300-mile commuting trips to and from practices and games.

So the Lyle/Pacelli girls basketball coach — who'd moved to Omaha, Neb., and had just finished his fifth year directing the Athletics — mulled it. Foremost on his mind were the players he'd nurtured at Lyle/Pacelli, how close they'd come to winning the “big” one, how close they were as people and all of the talent coming back.



Then he considered how hard his uncle and assistant coach Brad Walter pressed him to come back for one more season and how star 6-foot-5 center Kristi Fett had tearfully requested his return.

“I’ve never had the kind of bond with any coach that I have with (Morris),” Fett said. “I didn’t want to start over with another coach going into my senior year.”

So Morris weighed the entire thing — the 300-mile distance from Lyle and present home Omaha and all

— and said “yes.”

Is he ever glad that he did.

“All the pieces to the puzzle, they just fit,” Morris said of his team.

What happened Saturday afternoon at Target Center put a cap on this being the most satisfying, albeit exhausting, 4½ months of his life.

Those 18 weeks and thousands upon thousands of miles driven were deemed “worth it” by what he and his Athletics players and coaches had been so hungry for, a state championship. They’d lost in the state semifinals three years ago to the eventual state champion, before falling back-to-back seasons in the Section One tournament to 2016 and ’17 state champ Goodhue.

“I knew we could do it, and I just wanted to prove to the world that we could do it,” Morris said, explaining his return for a sixth season.

They did it, all right, and in the grandest of styles. The Athletics, who'd been ranked No. 1 in Class A all season, showed why for the final time as they powered and hummed their way to a 57-33 win over Sleepy Eye in the state championship game. It left L/P a glorious 32-1 for the season and gave the Athletics their first girls basketball state championship.

Fett stood out once again, with her 30 points, 16 rebounds and five blocked shots. But also — as usual — L/P got crucial contributions from a pack of players, including sixth-year starting point guard Brooke Walter, who ran the show and paced a stifling Athletics zone defense that held Sleepy Eye to 24 percent shooting.

When the afternoon was done, the Athletics had spent themselves hooting and hollering. But there was one L/P player who couldn't help but see another side to this.

That was junior starting guard Abby Bollingberg, who is watching senior starters Fett, Walter and Kendal Truckenmiller walk away, as well as her head coach, Morris.

"I'm kind of sad," Bollingberg said, fighting tears. "I'm glad that we won, but I'm just sad that it's over."

Pat Ruff

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Pat covers tennis, girls basketball, football, soccer, track and field, and baseball. He also writes about Gophers football and basketball, and the Timberwolves. He's been reporting for the Post Bulletin since 1994.