



Lyle-Pacelli head coach Justin Morris reacts to the LP crowd after the Athletics won in the Minnesota Class A semifinals in Target Center Thursday. Rocky Hulne/sports@austindailyherald.com

# Hulne: Athletics deserved their spot in the winner's circle



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When the Lyle-Pacelli girls basketball team finally had its moment in the winner's circle on the biggest stage, there was most likely a sense of awe and relief. But mostly there was jubilation.

This program has been through it all since I began covering the Athletics in 2007. There have been big ups, big lows and plenty of heartbreak. When Lyle-Pacelli assistant coach Brad Walter decided to take on the head coaching job to get the program in the right direction, his teams won three games in three years. But he knew there was a glimmer of hope in a group of youngsters that were coming up at the youth levels. However, that group had to learn to win as well.

If there was a single moment where winning seemed like a real possibility for the Athletics, it came back in 2009 when a one-win LP team pulled off a 65-53 upset over Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton in the first round of the Section 1A Tournament. The following season, LP went 17-8 and it hasn't come close to a losing season since that year. LP has now won at least 20 games in each of the last six seasons.

In the 2013-2014 season, Walter moved to an assistant coaching role, allowing his nephew Justin Morris, a recent college grad who had been an assistant coach for LP, to take over as head coach.



(<https://www.austindailyherald.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/COACHES.jpg>).

Lyle-Pacelli coaches Justin Morris, Terry Nelsen and Brad Walter have all done their part to finally bring a state title to LP. Rocky Hulne/sports@austindailyherald.com

“We had some kids come in who were really dedicated, but what’s hard is how do you get kids to this level when they’ve never seen what this level looks like,” Walter said. “We had kids put in a lot of time and it grew and grew. I told Justin we had some kids coming up and we had a shot, they just need some good coaching and dedication.”

Morris came in as a master of Xs and Os and his offense was able to get LP’s big scorers going. As the roster began to shape out, it looked as if 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 would be the best opportunity for the Athletics to win a state title. Brooke Walter was an up-and-coming standout point guard, her sister Courtney Walter was an effective shooter and a tough defender, current Luther forward Sarah Holtz, who is LP’s all-time leading scorer with over 2,000 career points and 1,000 career rebounds, was a scoring machine and Bethany Strouf was a steady, all-around force. LP grad Madison Truckenmiller was a key post presence on the 2014-2015 team.

But it wasn’t in the cards for either of those powerhouse teams. In 2015, LP watched eventual state champ Ada-Borup erase a 10-point lead with 9:11 left in the game to knock off the Athletics in the Minnesota Class State Girls Basketball Tournament semifinals.

In 2016, LP held a 15-point lead with eight minutes left on eventual state champ Goodhue, which ended the game on a 17-0 run. Eleven of those points came in the last minute and a half to shock LP.

When LP was knocked off again by eventual state champ Goodhue in 2017, it looked like it might all be over. Morris’s fiancée had moved to Omaha, Nebraska and he was planning on moving with her and giving up head coaching duties. But his mind began to sway when LP standout Kristi Fett came up to him after the game.

“Kristi was crying on my shoulder and she said I can’t leave, we’ve got to go finish this,” Morris said. “I didn’t know what to say because I was getting ready to leave. After that, Brad and I had conversations and we said let’s make this work together. Whatever it takes.”

Morris did move to Nebraska, but he also stayed on as head coach. He made plenty of long road trips back and forth between Lyle and Omaha over the winter and a lot of those nights had him locked in long conversations with Brad, who held down the fort with assistant coach Terry Nelsen while Morris was gone. Brad ran a fair amount of practices in Morris’s absence and he even coached a few games.

“It’s really been crazy,” Brad said. “There’s been so many nights where Justin’s driven up for games and he’s driven back to Omaha that night. His commitment has been crazy and I know the passion he’s had for it. It doesn’t surprise me.”

This season the Athletics came out with a new sense of determination and togetherness. You couldn’t ask for a better team chemistry than these Athletics possessed throughout the year. Players genuinely cared about each other on and off the court and nobody put themselves above the team.

LP was unflappable and unshakeable as it ran to its first ever Class A state title. As LP finally reached the winners’ circle, there were a lot of tears of joy flowing from coaches and players alike. After all, they weren’t just playing for this team. They were playing for all of the LP players before them who helped turn a program that won three games in three years into a perennial state title contender.

“We were running out of time a little bit and there was a huge sense of urgency [this year],” Brad said. “The kids before this set the foundation.”

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