

ZAZZALI SANK 362 PTS; AVERAGED SIX REBOUNDS

Lady Raiders Surprised Many, Finish with 21-8 Hoop Season

By FRED LECOMTE
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

Graduating four super athletes last season and returning just two varsity players, few would have guessed that the Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School girls basketball team could follow with another fine season. But the Raiders finished 21-8 to extend a 20+ wins season for the fifth-straight year. "No one expected us to go as far as

stunned South Plainfield, 49-45, before falling short to No. 1 Shabazz in the final.

"We had a great ride. We played a steady game against Ferris at our house. The Mendham game was absolutely a great game and in the semi's playing in front of a huge South Plainfield crowd they did a nice job, especially (Allie) Zazzali," said Davis. "In two games she scored 24 points

swipes and third in assists.

"She's a power forward in a point guard body," said Davis. "Every game she played against big girls giving away inches and pounds but made up with it with heart and had the bruises from head to toe to prove it. She's fearless, willing to do whatever you would ask of her. She's a tremendous athlete, a tremendous kid."

Senior Co-Captain Loni Kaye added a veteran touch and was third in scoring with 129 points, hit 21-53 free throws and nailed two 3-pointers.

"She played on my junior varsity championship team in 2003. She started every game for us and did a good job at the point," said Davis.

Co-Captain/forward Lauren Benovengo bore the responsibility of encouraging and organizing her teammates during the game. She was the physical force under the glass averaging eight rebounds per game, sank 84 points, had 16 steals and contributed 14 assists.

"She started every game at the center-forward position. In our first win over Westfield, she had 16 rebounds for a season high. She played the other team's tallest players, gave away inches in most cases, but always made it really tough to get the ball into the post, played a real physical inside game and did a really great job for us," said Davis.

Freshman forward Jackie Law grabbed a team high 258 rebounds. She was second in scoring with 267 points and first in thefts.

"Jackie is what Mains would be if Mains was four inches taller. She's almost as tough and physical, jumps well, has great timing on her rebounds especially on the offensive end," said Davis. "She has a nose for the ball, a knack for being at the right place and is tireless and relentless."

Off the bench, Kaylan Jaichon softened up the area under the glass and finished with 90 points. Against East Side, the freshman poured in 15 points, snatched 16 rebounds and led the team in blocked shots. Freshman Raychel Kruper netted 60 points. Kendra Spady finished with 36 points. Sophomore Molly Meehan netted 42 points, Emily Meehan contributed 22 points and freshman Kathryn DeCataldo finished with 10 points.

"This year we might be surprised a few teams. We won't be surprising anyone next year," said Davis. "I think we are going to be fine. I already mentioned to Shabazz's Coach Watson that we have set a date for the same time at the same place in the sectional finals next year and she said that would be just fine with her."



David B. Corbin (February 2006 files) for The Westfield Leader and The Times
BIG DEFENSIVELY AND OFFENSIVELY...Raiders freshman Jackie Law, No. 44, grabbed a team high 258 rebounds. She was second in scoring with 267 points.

we did. We built on what we already knew and gradually built on that," said first year Head Coach Bruce Davis. "They worked and played real hard and they trusted what we told them to do. No one walked all over us. We fought them tooth and nail and we were a tough out, so I was thrilled in this my first season. I could not have asked for a better bunch of kids."

Seeded second in the Union County tournament (UCT), the Raiders rattled Roselle Catholic in the quarterfinals, dropped a heartbreaker in the semifinals against Roselle but quickly recovered to defeat Union, 42-36, to grab third place.

"That one got away from us. As the two seed, we did not play very well against Roselle, a team we should beat more often than not. It would have placed us in the finals against Cranford," said Davis.

The Raiders got off on the right foot in the North Jersey, Section 2, Group 3 opener by defeating Ferris of Jersey City, 43-30. Next, they hammered 23-3 Mendham, 65-51 then

against Mendham and a season game-high 27 against South Plainfield. I was really proud of our kids, the way they fought. Just tremendous games."

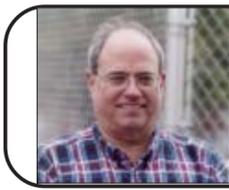
Junior guard Zazzali burned the net the most on the team with 362 points. She sank 29 three-pointers, dropped in 71 percent of her free throws, averaged six rebounds per game total and seven assists per game.

"She was tremendous all year long. She was our floor leader, our go-to girl. She wanted the ball when the game was on the line and came through for us a number of times," said Davis. "She established her self as one of the toughest and better players in the county. There are rumblings of post-season accolades that Zazzali was selected to the Union County Coaches Association All-Star Team - First Team All-County team in *The Star-Ledger* and Second Team All-Area for the *Courier News*."

Junior Lauren Mains, physical, relentless and one of the toughest players on the floor scored 85 points, hit five 3-pointers and was second in

Devil's Den

It's Spring, And An Old Man's Fancy Turns to (WHS) Baseball



By BRUCE JOHNSON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

Swimming, football and tennis are generally considered to be the top sports at WHS over the years, and it's tough to argue with that.

The boys and girls swim teams have combined for 29 state championships, by far the most of any school, and have won 1,012 meets between them while losing only 285. The football team, though in a slump the past few seasons, is still No. 3 all-time among New Jersey's high schools in victories and its 15 unbeaten seasons ranks No. 7 in the country. And both the boys and girls tennis teams are annual contenders for state honors, with boys tennis the only WHS program to produce over 1,000 victories in its history.

While baseball may not have those gaudy numbers, it has always been a strong sport in the town, whether at WHS—whose 11 Union County championships are the most of any school—or on the semi-pro (Hawks, Merchants) and American Legion levels.

If there is anything to nitpick about WHS baseball, it's the lack of statewide recognition. Back in the mid-1960s, the team had that recognition, when it was a contender in what was then the state's premier event, the Greater Newark Tournament. Several years coach Norm Koury's team skipped the state tournament to concentrate on the GNT.

There have been many WHS players who have gone on to play professional ball. Jeff Torborg and Jeff Stember both made it to the Major Leagues, while names like Sam Mitchell, Dave Townley, Rudy Stanzel, Bob List, Greg Chlan, Don Anderson, Ken Stith, Bobby Flynn, Steve Tebbetts, Kevin Stock, Drew Keehn, Kris Williams, and others whose names I can't recall, played in the minors.

But, despite all the wins and all the talent, there have been just two WHS teams that have won sectional championships, and one of those was the 1949 team that was awarded the North Section 2 Group 3 title by the NJSIAA. The only WHS team to win a sectional title on the field was in 1988.

The 1949 team was the best offensive team that Noel Taylor produced during his 13 years as coach. It featured hitters like 1b Howie Perkins (.318), 2b-p Jack Corbett (.327), 3b Frank Piscopo (.317), ss Rudy Stanzel (.304), lf Jack Van Hart (.279), cf-p Sam Mitchell (.333), rf Jim Scott (.278), c Dave Townley (.377) and cf Dick Johnston (.294). With Mitchell (5-0), Dick Smith (4-0) and Corbett (3-1) doing most of the mound work, the team went 14-2.

The 1988 team had some even more gaudy hitting numbers, led by cf-p Clint Factor (.453), 1b-p Kevin Stock (.421), 1b-rf Ted Hobbie (.408). Stock (7-3) and Factor (6-3) were also the

aces on the staff of a 19-7 team that beat Morristown, Elizabeth, Livingston and Bloomfield to win the sectional title, before falling 2-1 to Memorial of West New York in the state semifinals.

That could all become ancient history, if this spring's group can play up to its advanced billing. When you have a nucleus up the middle of All-State c Mike Murray, ss-p Tommy Ricciuti and 2b Mike Diaz—all four-year starters—you've got the makings of a very solid team. We'll find out about this team real quick, since it hosts Somerset County powerhouse Hillsborough Saturday morning at 11 a.m. behind Edison.

Coach Bob Brewster, starting his 24th year at the helm, brings a 386-217-3 record into the game. And some are already comparing this year's team to two of his earlier powerhouses, the 1994 and 1995 teams that went 24-7 and 27-3, respectively. Probably the best WHS team prior to that was the 1966 team, that included a skinny sophomore catcher named Bob Brewster and went 22-4.

If healthy, Ricciuti figures to get the opening start on Saturday, with Josh Gerckens at shortstop and Jay Anderson at third base. Brandon Cuba and Craig Ellis are other potential starting pitchers (one likely going Monday against Cranford, the other probably against Scotch Plains on Friday), and will start in left and center field when not pitching. Alex Zierler had a huge junior year at first base, while versatile Tom Bonard figures to be in the lineup somewhere, anywhere (ss, 3b, lf, cf, dh). A name to keep an eye on is Justin Olsen, a sophomore catcher who would be a full-time starter on almost any other team in the state. He recently slugged home runs in three consecutive scrimmages and could see time in right field or as DH. And don't forget speedy outfielders Jayshawn King, Sean Ferro, Pete Antonelli and Joe Vall-Llobera, slugging dh-c-1b Dave Kaplow, 1b-p Joe Schurig, and young infielders Evan Shapiro and Mike Lessner, who homered in a recent scrimmage.

This is a very deep and talented team. A win Saturday against Hillsborough won't guarantee anything any more than a loss will mean the start of a bad season. But it should be a classic opener, between two power teams that could meet again in June, late in the state tournament down in Dover Township. Be there Saturday, weather permitting (rain is in the forecast as I write this), of course.

BASKETBALL STUFF

Records of assists at WHS have not been well kept over the years, but it is believed that junior Tom Bonard established a WHS boys record this year with his 166 assists. The known old mark was 144, set in 1973 by the

legendary Timmy Goski. Mike Venezia scored 396 points this winter, giving him 594 for his career. That makes him 20th all-time at WHS and within range of becoming the school's fourth male 1,000-point scorer (Bob King, Bob Felter and Boo Bowers are the others).

Erin Miller finished her sophomore year with 739 career points, and has the third (377 in 2005) and fifth (362 this winter) highest one-year totals in school history. She is already fifth on the all-time scoring list, behind Krissy Jeremiah, Liz McKeon, Nancy Kasko and Karin Morgan. Miller is also third in career 3-pointers with 56, trailing just Jackie Cusimano (88) and Jeremiah, who made 66 in her senior year (1988), the first year of 3-pointers in high school.

THIS AND THAT

It won't become official until the next Board of Education meeting on April 15, but The Den hears that Jim Desarno of Kinnelon will be the next WHS football coach. ... The WHS boys lacrosse team has looked solid in recent scrimmages, led by Ryan Sharkey, Ryan Yarusi, Joe Simone, Will Harbaugh, Nick DeRosa and Luke Baran. ... If George Kapner is mentioning his boys tennis team in the same sentence as the great WHS teams of the 1980s, you know the veteran coach has got something special this spring. The first major test will come Monday and Tuesday, April 10-11, against Bridgewater-Raritan (home, 10 a.m.) and Livingston (away, 10 a.m.), respectively. ... The WHS softball team opens Monday at home against Cranford (4 p.m.), and will also host Scotch Plains (4 p.m.) at the end of the week. If coach Tara Pignolican find a replacement for graduated pitcher Lauren Gelmetti—Sam Mooney and Jen LaSpata saw some action last spring—it could be a very good year. Up the middle, WHS is super-solid with c Jillian Olsen, ss Kris Fietkiewicz and cf Mary Kate Flannery, the team's tri-captains.

TOP TOWNS

New Jersey Monthly recently picked its Top 100 Towns to Live In. Union County had many towns: Cranford, New Providence, Mountainside and Berkeley Heights were highly rated, and Clark and Scotch Plains both made the Top 40. Westfield didn't make the top 100. But Kenilworth and Winfield Park did. Kenilworth? Winfield Park?

Then I noticed that other towns not on the list included Millburn, Moorestown, Mountain Lakes, Princeton, Rumson, Summit, West Windsor ... and I started thinking maybe it was better to *not* be on the list than to be on it.

The Devil's Den appears every Thursday in *The Westfield Leader* during the scholastic season. Contact us with comments or questions at bj1019@aol.com.

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