

## Lady Raiders' OT Surge Tops Blue Devils for UCT Crown

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the ones to seal the deal. Every time I looked up at the clock while they were on the line, I could feel it more and more. I just knew we were going to pull it out."

"This is my last county game I'll ever play in. The county championship in soccer was important, but when you lay it all out, I have been in five championships and haven't lost one yet and wasn't starting tonight. I was absolutely on fire," said Zazzali.

Junior guard Erin Miller led the Blue Devils with 10 points, including 6-of-10 from the stripe, and made five swipes. Freshman Diana Venezia (10 rebounds, 3 blocks) finished with seven points, including a 3-pointer, while sophomore Kerri Pringle (10 rebounds, 2 steals) netted nine points, including two from downtown. Senior Katie Cronen rolled in seven points and Gab O'Leary hit a 3-pointer.

The teams had matching scores in each quarter of regulation, with the lead changing eight times.

"We were up with a minute and a half to go. They wanted it, we wanted it and this game could have gone either way. The difference at the end was that they came down the court, played a little tougher and boxed out when they had to, while we were not hitting the boards in overtime," said Blue Devil Head Coach Joe Marino. "When Venezia fouled out, that changed the complexion of our defense. Erin was held to ten points and that makes a big difference."

The 18-8 Blue Devils jumped out to a 10-4 advantage in the opening quarter. Pringle rattled the hoop from downtown and added a 2-point jumper. The 17-8 Raiders countered with an 8-2 attack to end the quarter, 12-12. Molly Meehan and Zazzali each hit four points.

With Zazzali's 3-pointer, the Raiders took a 19-14 lead the second quarter. Venezia, however, came up with

two blocks, three rebounds and four points to help knot the score, 20-20, at the half. Degman's four points helped the Raiders take a 27-23 in the third quarter until Miller answered with four of her own to tie the score, 27-27.

Cronen opened the fourth quarter with a 3-pointer that gave Westfield a brief, 30-27 advantage. The Raiders, however, played solid in-your-face defense with Law and Jaichon controlling the inside. Zazzali scored four key points as the Raiders went on a 6-0 run to take a three-point lead. Westfield pulled even, 35-35, to force overtime when Pringle hit a 3-pointer from the left side.

Zazzali opened the overtime, sinking two free throws, then Mains made her free throws and Law followed with an inside basket after grabbing an offensive rebound. With less than a minute left, Zazzali dropped in the game's final three points on free throws. Westfield scored on a free throw by Pringle.

"Any team effort you see, that's going to be the winner. This was a total team effort game. I never seen more passion and I'm not surprised with the outcome," said Law. "It was tough defense down there, crowding around down low because of our presence. The guards really stepped up, took some good outside shots, as well as some inside ones, while there were a lot of foul calls. It was basically fair on each end and could not ask for anything better."

"It was a whole team effort and everyone played amazing. Everyone was feeding off each other. It felt so good and everyone worked so hard," added Mains. "We knew that they knew a lot of our offenses so we installed some new things to kind of catch them off guard. We kept constant motion to get open shots and it worked."

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## Devil's Den She's Looked At Life From Both Sides Now

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

It was all so different, way back in the winter of 2003-04. Casey El Koury was a wide-eyed freshman, thrust into a starting role on the WHS varsity girls basketball team. As a freshman, she finished the season as the team's second-leading scorer.

But that was also a WHS team that played 21 games that winter and lost all 21, most of them by wide margins. "We had a lot of really good athletes on that team, but they weren't basketball players first," El Koury said.

You look at the names on that roster and you see:

Lauren Sinnenberg, the team's top scorer, but more known as an outstanding soccer goalie and lacrosse player.

Kristen Fietkiewicz, a standout volleyball player and one of the best shortstops in school softball history

Mary Kate Flannery, a four-year gem of a centerfielder in softball.

And on and on ...

Things changed dramatically the next year when coach Joe Marino greeted a freshman class that included year-round hoopsters like Erin Miller, Stephanie Slodyzcka, Gabby O'Leary and Danielle Infantino. The team improved to 9-14. The following year it went 14-10 when Tara Handza came aboard. This year's team, with the addition of standout freshman Diana Venezia and the improved play of senior Katie Cronen, junior Gabby Jakob and sophomore Keri Pringle is currently 19-8 (after Monday's state tournament first-round win over North Hunterdon), tying the school record for wins in a season, set back in 1990.

Basketball rules have changed over the years, but the games are still just 32 minutes long and it's still just five players on the court at a time. Despite being the team's No. 2 scorer again last year as a junior (in three games she was the team's leading scorer), El Koury's playing time has grown smaller as the team's talent level and win totals grew larger.

She comes from an athletic family. Her father, Joe, played basketball at Cranford High School under Bill Martin from 1967-69, and older sisters Lindsay (basketball) and Jessie (soccer) were both athletically inclined.

"Ever since I saw my sisters pick up a ball, I did the same. I always wanted to be just like them," said El Koury, who wears the same No. 12 her sister Lindsay wore. "Although my mom (Pat) never played sports, her support has been incredible. She always kept reminding me that I could do or be anything I wanted, as long as I worked hard enough for it."

"But I definitely grew up a 'daddy's girl,' in the sense that whatever hobbies my dad had, I needed to have the same, mostly basketball and golf. When I was in third grade, my father was

coaching Jessie's fifth-sixth grade team and they needed more players, so I signed up. I was barely able to reach the basket from the foul line, but I was still an asset in my father's eyes. I was able to play with the older girls and, most importantly, my sister, which in my eyes was a dream come true."

By the time she was in ninth grade, El Koury again found herself playing with the older girls, starting on the WHS varsity. That can be an intimidating situation but it wasn't for El Koury, who blended right in and became one of the team's leaders. "The losing got old," she said. "But that still might have been my favorite year. We all got along like we'd been friends forever."

Over the next three seasons, the win totals—and the expectations—grew.

"We all know that when we step on the court now, teams fear us. They have people scouting us weeks in advance of our game," she said. "Other people could see our talent and we eventually started to believe in ourselves as well. This year everyone gets along. We realized that we have to stick together. Without that, we are nothing. Together we fought through all the politics of high school basketball, together we dragged ourselves out of bed during the off-season to get into the weight room, and together we plan to take it all."

And El Koury is now getting a chance to show that the little girl who once trailed along behind her older sisters to the gym has grown into a young woman who sees the big picture. As a senior captain (along with Cronen and Miller) and the team's lone four-year player, El Koury is part-player, part-liaison between the coach and the other players.

"The coaches come to me about problems on the team, because I'm the oldest and I've been around so long, so I know how the 'system' works," she

said. "But I don't insist on any 'higher role' on the team. I just try to be the one to level it out. When there's a conflict between different girls, or players and coaches, I try to be the mediator; not because I'm older or the captain, I do it because without a high amount of respect going both ways, we will end up back in my freshman year, frustrated and with the loss of a possible successful season."

Having the role of peacemaker doesn't make it any easier to deal personally with her last season of organized basketball. A starter for 3½ years, El Koury has become a role player. If you've ever been an athlete, you know how difficult that can be for a highly competitive, and very talented, athlete.

"As a starter, that always made me feel so accomplished and on top of the world. Basketball season would roll around and every grueling conditioning practice in the off-season would all of a sudden be worth it," she said. "I was always the athletic daughter, the one whose name always appeared in the newspapers. Now I'm the girl retrieving water for the rest of my teammates and making sure everyone is paying attention in practice so when they get in the game, they know what to do."

"It's frustrating, but I show up for practice every day ready to work. It's my obligation to my teammates to put in the effort every day."

El Koury's basketball career will likely end when WHS's season ends. She hopes to go to Providence College but doesn't expect to play basketball beyond the intramural level.

"I love the sport, and always will, but college will be time for me to fully concentrate on my studies. I want to study abroad and experience new things," she said. "I will never stop playing completely. But you can't let

something like a sport define you as a person."

### PLANTIN' A PREPPIE

Colin Mackay would have rather have been wrestling in the state finals in Atlantic City this weekend. But the senior did end his WHS career in stunning fashion, scoring an 11-second pin over a Delbarton opponent in the Region 3 wrestlebacks.

Only Chris Jordan has ever had a faster WHS pin, an eight-second cement job in 1989 against North Bergen. Other 11-second pins were by: Bill Tomlinson (1962 vs. Rahway), Paul Wampler (1987 vs. Plainfield) and Ken Marsh (1990 vs. Cranford). Other quickies: Mark Giacone (12 seconds, 1986 vs. Hunterdon Central), Jeff Checchio (12 seconds, 1995 vs. Kearny) and Steve Jones (14 seconds, 1967 vs. A.L. Johnson).

### IN PASSING

It was beyond extremely sad to hear that Heather Braun (WHS '90), daughter of WHS Hall of Famer Pete Braun ('61) and Martha O'Neil ('63), died last Wednesday of a heart attack at the way-too-young age of 34. Heather was a member of two of the greatest athletic teams in WHS history—the 1988 soccer team that won the state Group 4 title and the '89 team that shared the crown with East Brunswick. The teams, coached by George Kapner, went a combined 40-2-2.

Heather is survived by her husband and two sons, one of whom had his fifth birthday party last Friday.

### ON THIS DATE

1947: Bob Clotworthy wins the first of his three straight state diving titles, and becomes the first of WHS's 83 state champions in swimming and diving. Clotworthy went on to win a bronze medal at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Finland, and a gold medal at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia.

### DEVILS OF THE WEEK

This week's free subs from Al the Owner at Westfield Subs (261 South Avenue East) go to seniors Colin Sullivan and Chrissy Isabella. Sullivan had four lifetime best swims in Sunday's Public A final against Cherry Hill West. "C-Sull" went 28.15 in his 50 breaststroke on the medley relay, 57.11 in the 100 butterfly, 23.62 leading off the 200 freestyle relay and 1:03.68 in the 100 breaststroke. Isabella, like Sullivan a high school-only swimmer, ended her career in the Public A final against West Windsor-Plainsboro South with a two-second-plus drop to a 1:02.73 and a key fourth place in the 100 butterfly.

The Devil's Den appears Thursday in The Westfield Leader during the school year. Contact us with comments, suggestions and complaints at bj1019@aol.com. GO DEVILS!



David B. Corbin for The Westfield Leader and The Times  
SHOWING HIS TRUE COLORS...Bruce Johnson, adorned in blue, shaved his beard in the form of a "W" and dyed it blue for the boys and girls swim teams' state championship meets.

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