

National champion HPU, opponents join in prayer at center court

April 22, 2008

Posted: 4/15/08



Players and coaches from Howard Payne University and Hope College (Mich.) join hands to pray the Lord's Prayer at center court in Brownwood Coliseum moments after the HPU Lady Jacket's 53-49 win in the NCAA Division III women's basketball tournament. Of more than 3,800 women's and men's basketball teams at all levels of NCAA, NAIA and other intercollegiate associations in the nation, the Lady Jackets remain the only undefeated team with a 33-0 record. They won the NCAA Division III national championship. (Photo by Jessica Melendrez)

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By Mike Lee

Howard Payne University

BROWNWOOD—The two teams each carried a 30-0 record. The stakes were high. The intensity was undeniable.

The No. 2-ranked Howard Payne Lady Jackets hosted the No. 1 Hope College (Mich.) Flying Dutch in a physically punishing game that left HPU forward Hope Hohertz with a concussion and center Stacey Blalock with a black eye.

In what would be the closest game all season for the national champion Lady Jackets, Howard Payne rallied for a 53-49 win to earn a berth in the NCAA Division III women's basketball Final Four. HPU's players, coaches and fans were ecstatic. Hope's players, coaches and fans were heartbroken.

But within three minutes of the final horn, every player and coach from both teams stood and held hands in the center of the coliseum floor, reciting the Lord's Prayer.

"The Hope game was as powerful and emotional as it gets," said eighth-year HPU head coach Chris Kielsmeier, whose Lady Jackets eventually won the NCAA III championship with a 33-0 record.

"Two good teams laid it all on the line for their universities. One moment, you're caught up in the intensity of the game. Then a minute later, you're standing and praying together. That shows the true good in this world.

"The Hope players were disappointed, and I don't know that any of them said a word. They didn't have to. It was just the fact that they were

standing in the circle and praying with us.”

Kim Hoffman, a senior forward for HPU, said the postgame prayer helps put basketball in perspective.

“When players from the other team pray with us, it makes us feel like one. The Lord and our faith come first. We all know the Lord gave us our talents, and if it wasn’t for him, we couldn’t do the things we do. We always try not to lose sight of that,” Hoffman said.

The postgame prayer has been a tradition after HPU women’s home games since John Nickols became the Lady Jackets’ head coach in 1995. Nickols and his successor, Mike Jones, led an unrehearsed prayer after home games.

“The year after I retired from high school coaching, I spent a year as a volunteer assistant men’s basketball coach at Southwestern Assemblies of God University” in Waxahachie, said Nickols, now an assistant professor of history and political science at HPU. “The head coach, Steve Garippa, did a postgame prayer, and it always stayed in the back of my mind.

“When I came to Howard Payne, I told our women it (postgame prayer) would be something good to represent the university. I’m prouder of starting that than anything I’ve done at the university.”

Although HPU home crowds aren’t praying within the circle, fans are respectful of the postgame prayer. Fans often are celebrating loudly in the moments immediately following a game. When they become aware of what’s taking place on the court, they observe silence and resume their celebration after the Lord’s Prayer.

“If you’re outside the building when a game ends, you would wonder what’s wrong,” Nickols said. “They’re screaming and celebrating, and then it just goes quiet. It’s like a switch going off. Even with the intensity of the Hope

game, the fans were quiet during the prayer.”

When Kielsmeier succeeded Jones as HPU’s head coach in 2000, he modified the postgame prayer by joining the players in reciting the Lord’s Prayer. He said this was the first season in which every team to visit the Brownwood Coliseum chose to join HPU’s players and coaches in the postgame prayer.

“Prayer is a very powerful tool in our program,” said Kielsmeier, voted the NCAA III national coach of the year. “We pray before and after every game, and we have a devotional before every home game in the locker room. The Lord’s Prayer is a neat thing because it’s shared with the other team and the fans.”

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