

Their "A" Game

North College Hill's year of living famously

By Jeffrey Hillard

The sounds you don't hear this January night are two, three, perhaps four basketballs bouncing in an empty high school gym and the voices of several players breaking down their game.

It's late on a school night at North College Hill (NCH) High School, and the varsity's practice ended two hours ago. The forecast of snow by morning matters not to these players pursuing something unfinished.

They crave to improve shots and moves. And when you crave to develop some skill, any undisturbed time is a gift.

NCH is this night ranked No. 1 in both the city and the state in boys' Division III basketball. Still, here are some of the guys, with snow in the forecast, craving.

At 11 p.m., they're shooting. Jump shot No. 200. It's started to snow. Once they shot until midnight. This self-initiated late practice is meant to help shatter the memory of a 2-18 season in 2002-03.

And that memory is indeed gone, replaced by a magical season that ended short of a state title this spring but still produced a glittering 21-1 won-loss record. The magic seems to have trickled down to help renew community spirit among the 11,000 residents of North College Hill, who are pushing toward a heightened cultural and commercial potential as never before.

There are two other reasons for this potential: O.J. Mayo and Bill Walker, NCH freshmen and two of the country's premier high school basketball players. Last year they transferred from Rose Hill Christian Academy in Ashland, Ky., where Mayo -- playing varsity as a seventh-grader -- averaged 23 points per game.

You can often find Mayo and Walker in the NCH gym shooting at night with their teammates. Walker is trying to get back into playing shape after knee surgery last summer that made him miss 20 regular season games this season.

Still, at 6-feet-6-inches, Walker won't rest on his laurels. His and Mayo's futures as potential college and pro basketball stars are there for the taking, if only they'll work hard enough.

They're not the only people in North College Hill dreaming of better things on these late nights.

'Social capital'

Sue Blum-Benzinger didn't see the NCH Trojans play this season. Nor does she know much about basketball.

Yet she realizes the team is shaping her city's history -- and local history is her pleasure.

Mayor Dan Brooks saw nearly every Trojans game. In his view, basketball history at NCH -- both boys' and girls' -- is tied intrinsically to the city's history and, as is certainly the case with this team, its commercial upswing.

The mayor and Blum-Benzinger have different impressions of basketball, but they typify the emotional responses when people discuss the boys' near-undefeated season.

"You can feel it," Brooks says. "These students are a walking advertisement of what kind of community we have."

The revival of the city's business association shows that the basketball team's high-profile image is something merchants can embrace, Brooks says. Members have talked about how much a winning team and atmosphere can mean to the community. The city/business/school connection has never been timelier.

For Blum-Benzinger, now is the time to uplift NCH's past. She wants to collaborate with city and school officials to increase awareness of local history.

An initial stage is the set of showcases containing historical memorabilia to be housed near the front of the renovated City Hall annex, where Blum-Benzinger now organizes historical documents on a long folding table within earshot of construction workers.

You can find her on her motorized scooter most of a day. When she's not volunteering at Drake Center, she sits on her scooter at the annex amid piles of receipts, memos and correspondence that map a paper trail of city progress over decades.

Last year Brooks appointed Blum-Benzinger, a resident for the past 42 years, NCH records retention programmer. It will take months to categorize material dating back to the 1940s.

She has resurrected the city's historical society. She's enlisted two college students to assist with a newsletter and with audiotaping and transcribing oral histories.

She doesn't let muscular dystrophy slow her plans. She ascribes her desire to accomplish things to her 90-year-old mother, who so selflessly has attended to people's needs that she gets more than 160 birthday cards each year.

As the student interns gather oral histories from older residents, they also record moments and events of the boys' basketball team, forming the starting point of portraying NCH basketball history.

It's important to see, Blum-Benzinger says, how a pioneering vision drove the three areas of Clovernook, Meyerville and "Sunshine" to form the village of North College Hill in 1916 and how its incorporation as a city in 1941 revolved around an influx of residents spurred by World War II.

It's important, she says, to see just how the idea of North College Hill started in 1906 with John Meyer's sawmill, a sprinkling of affordable houses and a church and how the dirt-paved, horse-ridden Galbraith Road eventually became a modern home to dollar-lunch eateries in the 1960s such as the Red Barn and Bill and Ralph's Meat Market.

Brooks credits Blum-Benzinger for thinking as seriously as he does about this fringe of the city's rebuilding process -- knowing history and what to do about it. But can one successful basketball team elevate community spirit to a visible level?

The answer is yes, but it's a fragile proposition, according to Kay Clifton, professor of behavioral science at the College of Mount St. Joseph. The new lift could be a "flash in the pan," with the aura of a celebratory event soon vanishing. Or the lift can be channeled toward long-term projects that encourage residents to participate and take responsibility.

When a highly praised basketball team with two nationally ranked players lifts a community's spirits and the community feels rejuvenated, that feeling is real and palpable, Clifton says. It's called "social capital."

The positive vibes around the team have created a surge that's carried over into the community, giving it "capital" or a social worth on which residents can build, if they choose to.

The social capital in NCH has been building for a few years, Brooks says, referring to how the community reacted when the girls' volleyball team won the state championship in 2003 and the girls' basketball team was runner-up in the state championship game -- two feats that certainly electrified school spirit.

Brooks bought his first house in NCH in 1969. Now 57 and mayor since 1983, he sees the community rebuilding from several major struggles.

One is the "reversing of the aging process," he says. NCH is an older town with an increasingly younger population.

"It's as painful as the young-getting-old scenario," he says.

NCH is now a quasi-urban area, far from the once rural town whose houses over 40 years often had only one or two owners. First-time homeowners are moving into older houses, fixing them up and living next to older residents. There's constant flux.

Marketing NCH is part of the city's rebuilding, Brooks says. But the city is in an enviable position, with a history of supporting small businesses, a revitalized Galbraith Road and the new success of its basketball team.

Social capital in NCH is starting to flourish, as shown by the historical society's efforts, church outreach programs, the business association reforming and, two weeks ago, a major American Athletic Union (AAU) national basketball tournament.

The veil lifts

Ovinton J'Anthony Mayo has melodic first, middle and last names. He's 16 years old, a basketball prodigy born in Huntington, W.V., and of such emotional value to the NCH community that numerous residents or alumni who hadn't attended a school basketball game in years attended at least one this season -- to see and talk about O.J. and the resurrection of the team.

Sometimes he's "O" or "J" to friends or coaches. His scoring, ball-stealing allure and court savvy are reminiscent of his idol, Cleveland Cavaliers' rookie LeBron James, the 19-year-old who jumped from high school straight into the National Basketball Association.

In fact, Mayo and James know each other. When Mayo was in sixth grade and James in eighth, Mayo guarded James in an AAU game in Huntington.

"LeBron only got 12 points that game," O.J. says.

When he speaks, you're often met with "Yes, sir" or "Yes, ma'am." When he speaks, the veil of prodigy lifts, revealing a friendliness and attention that remind you of a mature twentysomething.

At a varsity practice, I run the time clock while five players test a full-court press against five on offense. There's the sweat, hard breathing and jogging back into positions that come with pressing.

During a pause, O.J. steps over to the time clock and asks what I know about a hip-pointer, a severe bruise not uncommon in contact sports.

"It's incredibly sore, isn't it?" I ask.

"Yes, sir," he says.

"Pack ice on it, O. There are also some icy-hot creams that can numb the pain for a while."

"Yes, sir," O.J. says. "Good."

"Whatever you do, don't pack heat on a bruise. I'm not a trainer, but I know bruises. Check with coach about some foam for a little cushion."

"Yes, sir," he says.

I want to remind him he can call me by my name, but he's far out of range, back on defense, eyes on the ball.

It became apparent pretty quickly to the NCH players that, with Mayo's presence, last year's 2-18 season would not be repeated.

"He picks everyone's game up on the court," senior forward James Rodarmel says. "The things he does make you work harder."

Such scenarios became legend this season. By the fourth quarter of a game against Seven Hills, Mayo had dazzled the crowd with five slam dunks as NCH won 72-53. His seven assists just midway through the second quarter of a game against Summit Country Day enabled his teammates to share in scoring.

The team profited mostly from its defense, which got overlooked by the slashing slams by Mayo, Walker, sophomore Andre Evans and junior George Victorian.

The scoring-off-steals determined the outcome of a mid-February game against Wyoming, in a frustrating first half for NCH. Not since December had a team threatened to beat the Trojans.

The game was tied 32-32 at halftime. Less than four minutes into the third quarter, Mayo's flurry of steals and scoring shattered Wyoming's rhythm, catapulting NCH to an easy 82-59 win.

"I'll bet in local high school basketball, never has one player dominated a third quarter like that," says former NCH athlete Wayne Franklin, who for years has worked as team manager during games.

And then there was the Division III tournament game against Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy, when Walker finally got to flash his potential for the NCH faithful. In the first 30 seconds of the game, he hoisted the ball high en route to the first of several slam-dunks. Then he sprinted down the court on defense for his first, then second, blocked shot of the season. Did I mention it was 30 seconds?

You did not want to be under the basket on his first dunk.

At a critical moment late in the sectional final, NCH faltered in the fourth quarter, allowing Reading to get several key scores and win 58-47, spoiling its pre-season goal to win the state championship.

By then Mayo had gathered 617 season points, surpassing the 1975 record set by one of NCH's greatest athletes, Leon Murray. Mayo won the city's scoring title with 31 points per game, was Division III Southwest District Player of the Year, retained his rating by *Hoop Scoop* recruiting service as the No. 2 freshman player in the country and attracted the attention of a virtual *Who's Who* in Cincinnati sports -- Anthony Munoz, Paul O'Neil, Bob Huggins, George Wilson and Ralph Lee -- not to mention dozens of college scouts and coaches.

On March 23, the Associated Press awarded him Ohio Division III Player of the Year.

'What can I do?'

In Mayor Brooks' view, the kind of energy you find at a summer AAU game could be duplicated in a project like One Block at a Time. Beginning this spring, NCH is helping residents on dilapidated streets revive their blocks.

Residents are prepared to paint, cut grass and refurbish. The city is supplying equipment and assistance.

The project, run by a steering committee of 10 residents and business owners, could springboard into a class for new homeowners or a how-to class for those looking to buy homes.

"NCH changes not overnight but with help here and there, block by block," Brooks says.

Brenda England is an NCH entrepreneur whose popular bridal shop, Underground Treasures, occupies a block on Galbraith. She started in a remodeled basement on her current block. She later bought the building.

After 25 years in research and development at Procter & Gamble, England's love of consignment shops led her to risk being a full-time storeowner. It's now a mini-mall of gowns, bridesmaids' dresses and tuxedo sales and rental choices.

But England hasn't stopped there. Her vision is community-oriented, and she particularly wants to reach children. Her church will soon sponsor a formal gala, with gowns and tuxes supplied by Underground Treasures.

"I saw a need for kids to learn manners," she says. "Anyone can complain about kids, but what can I *do*? My church wanted to reach out more to children. I think this community can be thinking about it, too."

Clifton, the professor of behavioral sciences, views the initiative as more valuable than it appears, especially because young people are involved.

"Youths with a talent for music, drama, art or other skills need to be encouraged," she says. "As adults, we're responsible for helping all people."

'Get to your man'

NCH Head Coach Jamie Mahaffey knows how to instill the persuasive power of the word "team," and he knows young people. He works daily with students as an instructional aide and teacher at the school.

Mahaffey calls coaching "an assignment." He knows the advantages his team has in Mayo and Walker. He also knows Mayo's grandfather, Dwaine Barnes, is a coaching mentor who can teach him more.

At a practice in mid-February, Mahaffey calls his players to mid-court and waves over Barnes, a multiple-champion AAU coach, who helps teach the team a new full-court press strategy.

Off the court, Barnes observes the action, absorbing plays and seeing flaws, gaps and high points before anyone else. Part preacher, part teacher, part salesman on the court -- all coach, pure coach -- he situates players non-stop in a charismatic tone.

"Trap the ball," he says. "Take away that passing lane. Get to your man. Know where the ball is."

Mahaffey, a former Roger Bacon High School and Miami University basketball star, is the second-year head coach of one of the more respected high school teams in the country. This brings phone calls galore, faxes, e-mails, media requests and always the tedious rumors that Mayo might transfer before next season.

Mahaffey has heard the question ad nauseam: "Why would O.J. want to stay at North College Hill?"

There are many reasons why both Mayo and Walker would want to stay, including their success in the classroom, the abundance of new friends they've made and a basketball program that complements their court wizardry.

"You see them on the court, but both O.J. and Bill are fine students," Mahaffey says. "O.J. has a 3.2 grade

point average and Bill has a 3.1. Both lift weights, shoot on their own and constantly strive to get better."

Mahaffey says this coaching "assignment" is God-sent, "one to treat like gold." He hasn't forgotten the worn-out memory of last year's 2-18 team, which began with 12 players and ended with six. And he knows this opportunity is more demanding than the seventh-grade team he coached to an undefeated season and division championship in 2001.

Mahaffey can now influence his players in a way he's planned for years. Last year's team dwindled in size primarily because he stayed consistent with discipline, requiring his players to show respect on and off the court. In a losing season, discipline can be blurry in players' minds.

Some forgot or didn't accept their roles. But he kept focused on his system and asked that players who wanted to win stay with it.

With a healthy Walker in 2004-05 and another year of varsity experience for most of the team, Mahaffey will intensify the roles of the others around the obvious centers of experience, Mayo and Walker. Four freshmen, three sophomores and two juniors return next season, and current eighth-grade phenom Damon Butler will step up as a freshman to a varsity role.

Mahaffey and Assistant Coach Clifford Green share a vision of how the team should play. It was a fortunate union. They knew each other as McDonald's All-Americans in the early 1990s, when Mahaffey starred at Roger Bacon and Green at Withrow High School.

Green got a scholarship to play for South Carolina State University, but when he received his degree in child development in 1997 it reaffirmed that his life would be "giving back -- teaching, coaching and being an innovator in what I do," he says.

Green thrived. He was head junior varsity coach at Hughes High School and head coach at Cresthills Junior High School. He taught and founded the athletic program at Shroder Paideia Academy.

His personal goals were never firmer, until a series of adverse experiences with Shroder's administration pained him enough to leave the school in August 2003. Several students left Shroder to show support for Green, including two players, Andre Evans and Greg Evans, who followed him to NCH.

'I do believe'

In his cramped office across the hall from the boys' locker room, Joe Nickel checks a schedule on his laptop while he talks on the phone. He lifts his fingers off the keys long enough to pencil a note. In an hour he will sell game tickets.

Nickel, the mild-mannered former football and track coach who's an NCH guidance counselor, planned to retire this year after 32 years in the district and five years as athletic director. Opting to stay another year, he welcomes the calls, faxes and e-mails stemming from the basketball team's popularity.

"Things keep coming up I'd not imagined with attention to O.J., Bill and the team," he says.

Nickel is as composed today as when Barnes first described grandson O.J.'s game to him around Christmas 2002. The family planned to move O.J. to Cincinnati and enroll him in NCH. Last May, Nickel watched Mayo take charge in an AAU game.

"No way I could believe what I was seeing," he says. "Amazing. Coach Barnes came up to me and calmly asked, 'Didn't you believe me?' I said, 'Oh, I do believe.' "

Nickel had watched LeBron James play his freshman year at Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary High School, so he knows rare talent. He thought Mayo's skill level at age 15 surpassed the level James had at 15.

"O.J. controls every aspect of a game," Nickel says. "James was bigger, but he didn't command a game like O.J."

Nickel screens interview requests with Mahaffey, who, upon conferring with Nickel and Green, makes decisions. For much of the year, Mahaffey suspended interviews with players, and for good reason: He wanted to protect them from hype disrupting their focus.

Some media were overzealous. During the week of practice before the Lockland game, Mahaffey observed his players' focus drifting. Calls from *The Sporting News* and other media outlets were mounting. He told them no.

He became more judicious as requests escalated. Late in the season, Fox 19 News (WXIX) referred to Mayo's family as "handlers" -- to the coaches and Nickel, it was an insensitive reference and the kind of behavior they won't tolerate.

Mahaffey's response to such high expectations impresses Nickel, who thinks he has a unique asset that surpasses the court.

"We have a young coach who's more than a coach because he's so well accepted into the families of the kids and in the community," Nickel says. "People could see this and say, 'I'd like my kid to play in that school.' "

'I will be there'

The last time the Trojans went to the state tournament was 1989. Brooks realized then that NCH basketball was more a frame of mind -- more a heritage -- than a mere game. Not long after he began thinking of a way to make that heritage, that spirit, more visible: a community center, a hub where people can interact as a community.

Council has approved a community center with a multi-purpose gym and meeting space. The location has been chosen: at the City Hall annex on the corner of Galbraith Road and Hamilton Avenue. Architectural plans have been drawn.

Now comes the biggest part, paying for it.

The plan is for the center to be a nonprofit facility. Funding sources are being sought, with construction estimated at \$13 million. Residents would have the option of investing their own money in an interest-bearing account designated to the project. Brooks is optimistic it will be built in the near future.

"This desire to push projects like the community center is in part due to the basketball team," he says. "Their good visibility affects us all."

In Clifton's analysis, the community center could help establish an attitude of giving, so that one's donation of time, skills or money far outweighs one's expectation to take from the community.

"This attitude of giving is big," Clifton says, "and North College Hill residents shouldn't wait to give. But a community center can be just the thing -- a center where energy, actions and ideas are exchanged and needs understood."

Brooks agrees. He's arranging for the city council and school board to meet in regular brainstorming sessions to share ideas about broadening the relationship between the school and the community.

When the team seemed invisible to the city during its 2-18 season last year, Belinda Holden-Victorian was visible, and promises she always will be. She doesn't ever again want to experience the paltry attendance and absent cheering of the previous few losing seasons.

"We've got to make a commitment as supporters -- come out win or lose," she says. "Support this team no matter what happens in the future."

Her son George, entering his senior year in 2004-05, and his teammates will renew their goal to win the state championship. Holden-Victorian will remind residents that the team needs support during any future rough spots, too.

"I will be there, regardless," she says. "I'm trusting I won't be the only one."

In that commitment lies the hope of a team -- and a community. ©

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