

Thursday, Jan. 22, 2009

Reversing the trend in high school basketball

Private school players are finding benefits in playing for public schools

By Terron Hampton | Staff Writer

A seemingly odd phenomenon has taken place this winter on the county basketball scene.

In a day and age where much of the top basketball talent has chosen to attend private schools that have such benefits of playing in national tournaments, more exposure to college scouts and the attention of some of the top collegiate programs, several county players this season did the opposite.

DuVal High School junior Keith Crockett, Surrattsville junior Breanna Gross and Frederick Douglass sophomore Timmone Whatley all have made the switch this school year from private programs to public programs.

Crockett joined Tigers after spending last season with national powerhouse Montrose Christian in Rockville. Gross joined the Hornets after spending her sophomore year at Holy Cross in Rockville and Whatley attended Princeton Day in Lanham.

"I think this is the first time I can recall that happening," said Walker of a highly regarded private school player joining his program as Crockett has done. "This summer I heard that he was coming over to DuVal from Montrose, but my reaction was to not get excited and to just see if he enrolls."

All three have had positive and immediate impacts on their teams and the programs have had the same effect on the student athletes.

"I just thought that it would work out for me," said Whatley, who transferred to Douglass during the fourth quarter of the 2007-08 school year. "I heard coach [Ty] Massenburg may be coming there to coach and I thought he would be a great coach and it would be better for me. It's been pretty good here so far. I think I got comfortable starting from the first game and practice."

For Gross, the change was much needed. While attending Holy Cross, she would have to wake up at 5 a. m. each morning and her days wouldn't end until 11 p.m., which proved taxing.

"Well, I just mostly wanted to focus on my schoolwork," said Gross, who spent the first three weeks of the school year at McDonough High in Pomfret. "A lot of that was hard for me to do at Holy Cross. My main focus was to get my grades where they have always been without me getting tired."

What may be a surprise to some who have reservations about the quality of play or academics within the public schools, Gross, Whatley and Crockett find few differences between the two.

Massenburg talked about some of the misconceptions.

"Some kids find that going to a private school team is not as simple as it seems," Massenburg said. "Some private schools are good situations. Some kids go to private schools and don't get their dream of playing high school basketball because they don't get to play that much. They find that when you come to your neighborhood public school and have that chance, that it can still work."

Gross' father, Ed, feels comfortable with his daughter's decision.

"If you are a student, you can excel anywhere you go," Ed Gross said. "Surrattsville offers the same thing academically in study hall that Holy Cross does, which is very important prior to practice so they can get that done first. You'd be surprised with a public school that they are on point like that. On top of that, there's a bus that picks her up, so there's a little more rest and study time."

Gross and Whatley say the acclaim that the county gets for its level of basketball is deserved.

"Yeah, there is talent in the public school league," Gross said. "Some of teams we played against, I would like to see them play against some of the players I played against in private school."

"It's a lot of talent in the public schools. It's about the same as in private schools. You're going to see at least one good game a night," Whatley said.

E-mail Terron Hampton at thampton@gazette.net