

COMMENTARY

Be true to your school

Attending the Drummond Lumberjills-South Shore Cardinals girls basketball game Tuesday in Drummond, I was struck by a few things. Most notably, the coziness of the Drummond School District building, and the incredibly good condition that place seems to be in. Which brings me to small schools, small towns, and the mutual support that makes both go.

Let's talk more about Drummond. In a Q & A the Daily Press did with Lumberjills star player senior Jordan Bjork, who battled all night before fouling out in the 'Jills close loss to the Cardinals, Bjork made mention almost immediately about how she could not have become the player she is — a 1,000-point career scorer and bound for college where she will continue to play basketball — without the emotional and very real financial support of her community. Kudos to Drummond, and congrats to Jordan. As I watched Bjork and her tough teammates match rival South Shore bucket-for-bucket, I noticed a couple of other things as well.

First was the revved-up Drummond student section. With a high school of around 90 pupils, I was told, an entire section of bleachers was occupied by what appeared to be about 1/3 of the student body. They were a little raunchy, a lot clever, and unrelenting (obviously so) in their support for their team. And it didn't stop there.

How about that pep band? Yes. You heard me right. The pep band. This crew rocked it all night from the gym stage, with at least three percussionists who used chairs, drums and, of course, more cowbell, to keep the energy level of everyone up — players and fans alike.

I wasn't surprised to see a trophy case packed with titles and awards as I left the Drummond gym. It wasn't hard to imagine the many pancake breakfasts, 50-50 raffles and anonymous donors who chipped in to make that happen.

Let's face it. In a small town — any town or neighborhood for that matter — the school better be the heart of the community. Neglect your school or, worse, blanket it with negativity, and a slow death begins that hits both school and town equally hard. Boost your school, and you restore a bounce and beat as true as any basketball, volleyball or drum set. And if ball sports, cleats or drums aren't your thing? Hell, up here (and of course at Drummond) a student can be on the ice fishing team.

It's probably the only sport where more cowbell will never be requested but, if you need more rods and reels, an all-in-for-its-school community will make it happen.

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PAUL BARNES

Diggers top LCO

The Mellen Granite Diggers boys basketball team withstood a stiff challenge from the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe School (LCO) on Mon., Jan. 10, before eventually securing a 66-61 overtime home win behind junior Tommy Zakovec's 40-point scoring effort. The victory is Mellen's first in conference this season, while LCO drops to 3-6.



Junior Lily Truchon is a returning all-conference player for the South Shore Cardinals. With a scoring average of nearly 27 points per game, Truchon has emerged as one of northern Wisconsin's best offensive players, capable of playing all five positions for South Shore. (Contributed photo)

South Shore girls remain unbeaten

BY PAUL BARNES
For the Ashland Daily Press

Gritty rival the Drummond Lumberjills didn't make it easy on the South Shore Cardinals but, with South Shore's hard-fought 33-30 win on Tuesday night at Drummond, the Cardinals moved to 12-0 on the year and hold a spot atop the Indianhead Conference with Hurley. Junior Lily Truchon, a returning all-conference player currently averaging nearly 27 points per game, isn't completely surprised by the team's success thus far — though there is room for progress, she said.

"I knew we had a strong team and figured we could get off to a great start," Truchon said. "We are very unselfish players, move the ball around, and find quality shots. As a team we need to find more balance scoring, continue to improve on starting games faster. I prefer a fast-paced transition

offense where we push the ball up the court because it creates more energy for our team."

Coach Ryan Tiberg wasn't quite as sure his team would come out this strong — but he agrees with Truchon that the Cardinals have not reached their peak.

"No, I did not expect to be undefeated at this point in the season, with COVID and the uncertainty of who is available to play each night," Tiberg said. "I thought we might have stumbled along the way. I feel the team is playing at a high level currently — a few strengths I am seeing are our defensive skills and rotations, our ball handling and sometimes our shooting and scoring ability. A few areas we need to improve on are rebounding, taking care of the ball and making better in-game decisions. I prefer to coach a transition, fast-paced offense and a full-court pressure-defense

where we turn teams over and score off of the extra opportunities."

Having knocked off Drummond, a team both Truchon and Tiberg rate along with Hurley as the toughest teams in the Indianhead Conference, South Shore squares off against Hurley Friday. Because the Cardinals will play both teams twice in conference, it's a little early to call the games must-win, but the respect both player and coach have for these two teams is clear.

"Drummond's defense," Truchon said, "We have a hard time scoring against them, and Hurley has good shooters that we will need to watch out for on the perimeter."

Tiberg added that preparation for both teams is critical.

"Each team has depth, size, scoring, and is well-coached," he said. "In practice we do different drills to prepare for (them). I usually go over

a scouting report before we play to go over their personal strengths and weaknesses."

South Shore, with just 56 students, is making noise as it does so often with teams that, because of the school's size, continue to amaze. Truchon looks to break 1,000 points in career scoring this season, with plans to play in college. Tiberg's goals as coach don't change much from one year to the next, he said.

"So far this season I am happy with our success," he said. "I feel the team is coming together and improving on a daily basis. I believe that every team, when the season starts, has goals of conference, regional, sectional and state championships. My team is no different. We have regional rivals we play each year, and our goal is to win against those opponents, win all our home games, and play well on the road."

Packers OLB Smith practicing, eyes playoff return

GREEN BAY (AP) — Green Bay Packers outside linebacker Za'Darius Smith is practicing again, raising hopes the 2020 Pro Bowl selection could return for the playoffs after missing nearly the entire regular season.

Smith, who recorded a combined 26 sacks for the Packers from 2019-20, participated in the Packers' practice Wednesday as they begin post-season preparations. The Packers (13-4) own the NFC's No. 1 seed and lone first-round

playoff bye, so they won't play until Jan. 22 or 23.

"I think we just want to reacclimate him into practice and see how that goes and see how it all meshes before we solidify our plan," Packers coach Matt LaFleur said. "Luckily, we not only have this week but we have next week to continue to get him up to speed, so to speak."

Smith hasn't played since the season opener due to a back issue. He was on the field for just 18 snaps

during that opening game, a 38-3 loss to the New Orleans Saints.

That followed a 2020 season in which he earned second-team honors in the All-Pro voting.

LaFleur didn't reveal how the Packers might utilize Smith in the playoffs. LaFleur noted that Smith hasn't gotten many opportunities to work in first-year defensive coordinator Joe Barry's scheme. Smith practiced just one day during training camp.

"He hasn't been really in the system

other than one game, so we've got to make sure he understands his job responsibility, first and foremost," LaFleur said. "Because as we've seen so many times throughout the course of the season, when we have all 11 guys on the same page doing their responsibility and owning their roles, I think our defense can be pretty good. And if you have some undisciplined play, then you get beat."

Packers outside linebackers Preston Smith, who isn't relat-

ed to Za'Darius, and Rashaan Gary have stepped up in Za'Darius Smith's absence. Gary improved his sack total from five in 2020 to 9½ this season. Preston Smith has nine sacks, up from four last season.

In other injury news, quarterback Aaron Rodgers said the toe that was bothering him for much of the second half of the season is starting to feel better. Rodgers said he hasn't needed to take a pain-killing injection on the toe "in a number of weeks."