



GILA BEND GIRLS BASKETBALL PROGRAM HAD REMARKABLE TURNAROUND

PHOENIX, AZ (February 17, 2009) – There are times when success is not measured by winning a championship trophy, but how much improvement a high school sports program shows over a period of years.

Such was the case with the girls basketball team at Gila Bend this season.

The team had a 21-6 record and a 14-game winning streak entering the Class 1A South Region tournament, but fell short in its quest to earn a berth in the state tournament.

Still, it was a remarkable turnaround from when Dallas Luttrell took over as head coach four years ago.

He was one of the leaders at the Arizona Department of Public Safety officer training academy in the Phoenix area.

When he was transferred to Gila Bend to run the Highway Patrol office about four years ago, he took on responsibilities in addition to his daily work and used the same leadership skills.

He also had some coaching background, and inquired about any position that might be available at the high school. He took over the girls basketball program.

To say that the job presented a challenge was an understatement. The program had just two winning seasons in 20 years and reached the state tournament just twice in the school's history.

But he had to start somewhere.

And so he did. He had to change the players' mindset, instilling a strong work ethic utilizing a great deal of self-discipline.

There were 19 at that first practice. Some did not want to pay the price and fell away. A few others remained, stuck with it and a few remain to this day.

"That first year, I had some people tell me we would be lucky to win one game," Luttrell said.

The team went 7-18 in the 2005-06 season, 12-14 in 2006-07 and 19-12 a year ago, reaching the state tournament for the first time since 1981-82.

Luttrell did not have assistants at first, but added a few. He placed his team in a few summer tournaments and offered an open gym, even though the air conditioning was limited or there was none at all.

The team posted its strong record this year despite having just eight players for most games.

"But they work extremely hard and play well together," Luttrell said. "The fact that this thing has been turned around has been a testament to the hard work of all the players who have played here during these last few years."

Last summer, the team participated in a summer league at Mesa Skyline High. Gila Bend played one of its games against Mesa Mountain View, one of the top teams in Class 5A Division I.

“It made us better,” Luttrell said.

That took awhile, however, when the team got off to a slow start when one of its top inside players dealt with a respiratory infection and the point guard had a bad case of shin splints.

The team persevered and did not lose a game from Dec. 13 through Feb. 7.

Luttrell’s team leaders this season were senior inside player Diamond Ochsner, an aggressive rebounder and accurate free-throw shooter, senior Sara Hollowell, who can adjust to virtually any position or situation and is perhaps the team’s top defender, and junior point guard Genesis Fernandez, who is only 5-feet-3 but averages 20 points and has had four games in which she has scored 30 or more points.

“I’ve had quite a few 5A coaches tell me that she (Fernandez) could play at any level in the state,” Luttrell said.

The players were in top-notch condition. With few players coming off the bench to spell them, they had to be.

“Defense is our offense,” Luttrell said. “We press and run a lot. Not many people are going to outrun us. We are averaging about 48 points, which is pretty good for 1A.”

Luttrell hopes the program can continue to build on its recent success.

“Some people might not think we have a chance, but they didn’t think we could turn things around at the start of the season and look how far we’ve gone. I’m proud of our players,” he said.

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