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Ozone Means Opportunity

By Lou Fancher



Height may be an advantage, but this young player proved he's got game Photo Tod Fierner

Last week basketball became bigger than just a game. When ten super athletes pound up and down the court as part of an Ozone Night, an event put together by Saint Mary's College (SMC) and the Hayward Youth Academy (HYA), the business of putting a ball in a hoop is no longer just a game. It's a chance for a child to dream, for a parent to hope, and for a community to lift its collective chin with pride.

Chris Major, President of HYA, is the human power pack behind the operation. Buzzing with energy, Major has gathered a mesmerizing group of individual and corporate sponsors to bring sports to kids and kids to the college. He's an '83 graduate, leaving SMC with not only a degree, but with a refined sense of civic responsibility.

The purpose of HYA is definitely multifaceted, but one word says it all: opportunity. In addition to a long list of outreach and support services, the nonprofit organization pairs Gaels star athletes with youth, ages 8-15, from the Bay area.

This year, that star is center Omar Samhan. Samhan is proof that a player can be much more than just a player. "He's as genuine as there is," Major says, explaining the instant rapport Samhan has had with the HYA children. Not exactly a top student upon entry, Samhan has worked hard both on and off the court. "Saint Mary's really took a chance on a kid who had that inspired wonder in him," Major says.

"He'd play at 6:30 in the morning with us old guys," adds A. J. Rollins, a SMC alumnus and former player attending the HYA event. "He came in ready to work and now it's paying off." Rollins and Major are invested in Samhan; the personal connection is clear, tight, like a family.

The young basketball players at the December 29th Ozone Night are part of that same family even now, years before they may attend SMC. Eddie Gamez, 11, has participated in the program since second grade. He plays point guard, plans to be an architect, and has two things to say: "I play for fun," and, "If I'm losing, I like to try harder."

Kris McClain, 12, impresses during the half-time game with his agile, physical facility and his enthusiasm for fellow players. "I like to work on close shots," he says. He hopes to play ball professionally, but if that dream isn't on his path, he wants to be an engineer. Both kids understand challenge: what makes them unusual is their calm determination.

"Being involved in sports teaches you how to have victories and defeats," says Rod Roch• an '85 graduate of SMC and active supporter of the HYA. A businessman and avid sports enthusiast, he's a towering cheerleader for two of the Lasallian principles SMC and HYA embody: quality education and community inclusiveness.

The spirit of Ozone Night is so infectious, even parents are transformed. Michelle Mike, herself back in college for a second degree, is considering graduate work at SMC. She speaks for her son, but might as well include herself, when she says, "I'm glad he can see the different avenues he can go down for success." Mike is not unaware of HYA's realistic subtitle; that success is limitless, as long as you set goals.

Ozone Nights do set high goals. Pre-game talks emphasize academic excellence as much as athletic prowess. The event is a relay of sorts, with older generations passing along the baton of perseverance and responsibility. Handed from Major to Roch•to Samhan to McClain and Gamez, it's a weighty message. But that is when a kid is not just a kid. He or she is a someday college student and athlete.



Looking for the pass at Ozone Night Photo Tod Fierner

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