

Stories This Weeks

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Summer Basketball Camp: Record turnout at Hilbert College

By Michael J. Petro

If it's basketball that campers desire, Hilbert College delivers during four week-long summer sessions.

Under the direction of Richard Walsh, the college's athletics director, the camps keep participants in grades three through 12 thinking and playing basketball all day from 8:45 a.m. to 8:45 p.m. Monday through Thursday after registration on Sunday afternoon. And there's even the rare opportunity for campers to stay over night during each session in the dormitories at the college.

The camps are split into two sessions each for boys and girls and the second boys session this week (July 12 through 16) was sold out with a record-turnout of 185 participants, 122 of which took advantage of becoming a resident during that time. By the end of the second girls session next week (July 19 through 23), the college anticipates having more than 500 basketball players attend the four camps.

"The numbers prove we're doing a good job here," said Walsh in his ninth year of directing the camp with the help of Hilbert coaches and student-athletes, local high school coaches and college players. He noted 75 people are hired over the four weeks to assist. "It's really become a family affair. Parents can come out and watch and they really like the safety and structure of the camp."

Walsh believes the strength of the program goes beyond just the idea of having fun and improving each campers' game. The appeal may actually be how well the programs are put together.

Aside from learning the fundamentals and facets of the game at stations and getting in three games per day Monday through Wednesday then having championships on Thursday, participants get awarded constantly for their good play and efforts, listen to expert speakers, watch sports-related movies and instructional videos and have all they need on campus within the reach of several surrounding buildings.

"These kids want to play in games and we give them that and they're also still learning so we're employing fundamentals," said Walsh, who once headed the Hilbert men's team, in addition to assisting current University of Michigan head coach John Beilein at Canisius College. "They get better in one week but we also want them to make friends, have fun and be safe. We try to send a message in everything that we do. We want to make it a memorable experience for them."

It was for Brian Ferris, the assistant varsity coach for St. Francis High School, who attended the camp for eight years as a child. Now, Ferris is not only a first-time instructor but he is bringing his own 12-year-old child to get the same experience he once enjoyed.

"Coach Walsh does a good job directing this. It's well organized and there's a lot of basketball," said Ferris, who had many of his St. Francis basketball players at the session. "In the one week I could tell my son got better. I wouldn't be a part of a program if it were poorly run."

Local children throughout the Southtowns and beyond attend the camp. In fact, a few participants made an annual trip from Luxembourg, Germany to once again be at one of the boys' sessions. Lake Shore varsity basketball head coach Dan Gerken said its camps such as this one that help youth learn to compete while becoming social with each other and building sportsmanship. He said he has seen many new friendships built at the the camp.

“It’s a hidden jewel that they have available here,” said Gerken in his second year as an instructor. “It’s a credit to how the camp is run. Kids have so many distractions during the summer but they seem to always come out for this one. I worked at a lot of different camps and wish some of them were a lot more like this one.”

Campers are able to keep their focus during the 12 hours because of the way the day is broken up, according to Rob DeGrandpre, Hilbert men’s basketball head coach. After warm-ups and shoot-arounds, campers are split into age groups and ability levels for a plethora of skill and character building activities with breaks in between for relaxation and what Walsh calls the “unbelievable food” at the college.

“It’s a long day but we find that their energy levels are still very high,” DeGrandpre said. “The kids here are driven and this type of camp hopefully continues to drive them to pursue basketball throughout high school and into their college years.”

Some of the fun features of each session include the recognition of outstanding achievements throughout the day which Walsh said keeps the participants interested and enthusiastic. Also, on the final day of camp, Walsh noted that the staff pulls down the bleachers inside Hilbert’s Hafner Recreation Center and allows the championship games to be played on the full-court gym floor as if it were the college’s home game. In addition, team awards are given throughout Thursdays inside the gym.

“You should see their eyes light up for that,” Walsh said. “It’s fun to see.”

Then there’s the opportunity to sleep over which for many campers will be their first-time away overnight from parents and guardians. Walsh believes it’s important for youth to feel that autonomy but at the same time, be closely supervised.

“I don’t think other colleges offer the ability to stay overnight,” Walsh said. “That’s kind of our niche.”

The camp’s summer sessions began on June 28 with a boys’ week, which was followed by the first girls’ week starting July 5. The second boys week, which is predominantly made up of children ages 10 to 14, enjoyed not only the huge turnout but some of the nicest weather so far during a rainy summer. It allowed the use of a number of courts set up right outside the school’s gym. The second girls’ week still has openings for enrollment.

It has gotten so busy over the past three weeks that Walsh found himself becoming a sleep-over resident of the college, too. Due to his dedication to the program, during the first three sessions, Walsh slept over at the school Sunday through Wednesday night.

“It’s good exposure for the college,” Walsh said. “These are potential students that may say down the line that they remember their experience playing here.”

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