2018 Basketball Banquet Remarks

There are ballclubs throughout history that have been known as "Teams of Destiny". For reasons both obvious and obscure, they earned that moniker and it stuck with them. On December 19, 2017, with their record sitting at a dismal 1-6, it was difficult to imagine a set of circumstances that could cause the Husky basketball team to be included in that group.

A new coach, a roster that had seen nine seniors graduate from the prior season, and a daunting crop of city teams that looked likely to go far in the playoffs gave everyone good reason to write off the Huskies.

On closer inspection, however, North's varsity club was just beginning to pull together the makings of a memorable season. Those six losses had been by an average of just four points. The "new" coach had recent success at bringing young clubs together with results measured at the end of the season, not the beginning.

And the Huskies had a collection of seniors who simply would not let inexperience get in the way of their desire to win.

After December 19, the Huskies ran off 12 wins in their next 18 games and wrote their names into the school's record book with a Sectional title that had been twenty years in the making.

This ball club pulled together in a way that few others have. Recent seasons at North have witnessed pre-season promise break down with the heartbreak of agonizing losses late in the season. Except for one week in February, the 2018 Huskies were the opposite of that. They became a nightmare matchup for most teams with their ability to launch shots from long range as well as play inside-out when it suited them.

Nowhere was this more on display than the season finale against a Vincennes Lincoln team that had beaten Evansville powerhouses Bosse, Memorial, and Harrison. Senior Cameron Seaton propelled the Huskies to a first quarter lead with 7 points in the first quarter. He hit a three from outside early, but then took the ball into the paint for another pair of baskets. In the second quarter, the Alices sagged back into a zone to cut off the inside game and this time it fell to senior Zack Mosteller to ignite the rockets with a pair of three point shots from downtown.

The Huskies threw in another pair of threes to stoke a four point halftime lead and Vincennes Lincoln came out for the second half prepared to run a trapping matchup man-to-man that met the ball outside the three-point arc. North then turned the tables and junior DJ Redding began to take the ball to the hole

with a pair of layups while picking up assists on baskets in the paint from seniors Ryan Huebner and Nate Toone.

By the time the fourth quarter rolled around, this Husky club that had lost so many close ones early in the season, this club that had struggled down the stretch to hold a lead, this club had grown to the extent that they knew how to batter away at an opponent's weakness and how to handle the final minutes by controlling the ball. By the final weeks of the season, the 2018 Huskies were winning games by dictating terms to their opponent. In the final minutes of games, the Huskies were forcing teams to spread their defense thin and chase the ball. They were winning by shooting only layups or free throws as the clock wound down.

And they were making them.

If you had to pick the three most satisfying opponents for the Huskies to beat in order to win a Sectional, it would have to include Central, Reitz, and Castle.

Central certainly would lead the list as North's rival in all sports. Having lost to the Bears in that dreadful week in mid-February, it was difficult to imagine turning around a 13 point margin.

Unless you saw the Vincennes game first hand.

The maturation of Ryan Huebner over the season was a key to North's late season flourish. His ability on both the offensive and defensive ends of the court to turn his wiry strength and good instincts into points and rebounds was directly related to his playing time. After getting in foul trouble repeatedly early in the season, he began to play a more contained style of defense and his consistent ability to take the game "inside" made a huge difference in the season.

Against Central in the Sectional, he was a true force to be reckoned with. He scored the Huskies' first seven points of the game and was denying the Bears second chance shots on defense.

North went toe-to-toe against the Bears' zone defense with the "inside-out" offense and in the second quarter it was Seaton and junior Seth Seniour who led the way. Despite the fact that shots weren't falling, those two owned the offensive glass throughout the quarter and it led to North adding to their lead in spite of hitting just 4 of 18 shots from the field.

Think about that...

The North Huskies shot just 22% from the field in the second quarter of an opening round Sectional game and not only did not collapse, they built their lead from 5 points to 8 at half time. Past seasons would have seen that same stretch demoralize and overwhelm Husky squads.

Not this group of young men.

They stood their ground, played solid defense, battled for rebounds, and hit their free throws.

It was this quarter of basketball that I think best defines the 2017-18 Huskies. Led by a coach who believed in them, they bought in and believed in themselves. They developed their respective skill sets along the way and became a collective group in which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

Ask any coach or any long time observer of sports and they will tell you that is the trademark of a champion team.

If beating Central is satisfying, the knocking off the Reitz Panthers is a barometer by which Evansville sports are judged. No school is consistently better across all major sports year in and year out than Reitz has been throughout the decades.

Having let an early season fourth quarter lead slip away and end in defeat against the Panthers, North expected a 32 minute battle. To the surprise of nearly everyone in the stands, this time it was the blue and gray that spent the fourth quarter wondering where their lead had gone.

The first half had been a back-and-forth affair with sophomore Kolten Sanford keeping the Huskies close with ten points. When Reitz opened a five point lead midway through the third quarter, the Panther fans got noticeably louder. Fists were pump in the air, their student section was chanting "scoreboard" to counter every North cheer, and if past years were any indicator, it was just the start of something that would only get worse.

And then the Huskies took over.

Sanford buried a long distance three, Seaton stole the ball and fed Huebner a pass that netted two points. Redding hit a three from the top of the arc and then Seaton began taking the ball to the hole with such force that he drew a pair of fouls, hit four free throws and added another basket at the end of the quarter to give North a lead it never relinquished. Sanford owned the fourth quarter and when the buzzer went off, the Huskies were in their first sectional championship game in 17 years.

If you look in the dictionary under any of these words, there is a picture of the Castle Knights:

Cocky

Arrogant

Self-absorbed

Terrible losers

Much to the delight of Husky fans everywhere (and for that matter, Evansville sports fans everywhere), the 2018 Huskies gave the Knights the opportunity to experience all four of those labels.

There will be few who will remember that the Knights led by 12 points at halftime. It will be my solemn duty to remind Castle fans of that fact for years to come. All most folks will remember is that the game went to overtime.

But if you're a Husky fan, you'll remember the comeback started with a pair of long-range threes from Kolten Sanford. With the third quarter nearly ended, and Castle's lead still in double digits, Sanford's sure hand belied his comparative youth. On two of North's next three possessions, he hit 'nothing but net' from long distance and with most of the fourth quarter to play, the game was back within reach. Huebner then raked the offensive glass for a put back bucket. He got another one on the next possession. Redding drove the hole, got fouled, buried the free throws and the game was tied.

The Castle fans were howling at the officials, the North student section was going berserk, and it was "game on" to the finish line. Huebner and Redding hit clutch free throws to keep the game tied and it looked as though the Huskies had it won when Sanford got an open look from 16 feet at the buzzer.

...and the ball rimmed out.

Husky fans let out a moan. They had been here before. A narrow miss against Harrison a few years earlier had led to an embarrassing double digit overtime loss in the Sectional semi-finals. A missed layup a few years back against a 20 win Bosse club had led to an overtime that bruised North's ego.

Not this ball club, not this season.

Ryan Huebner sank a 22 footer from the top of the key to open the O.T. Seth Seniour "owned" the offensive glass during the period and any time a North shot went errant, he raked it in and fed another shooter. D.J.Redding added a pair of buckets and the Huskies opened up a 7 point lead on their way to the Title.

Teamwork carried the day.

Teamwork carried the season.

Teamwork carried this club to cutting down the nets.

Teamwork carried this club to becoming a bona fide "Team Of Destiny"

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Over the course of the season, there were some individual marks and measures that deserve mention. Some of these young men set career and season marks that compare well against some of North's all-time greats.

For instance:

Kolten Sanford's 435 points this season were good for 16th on the all time single season scoring record and the most in a season since Robert West scored 445 in 2015. Cameron Seaton's 385 ranked 27th all-time.

From a career perspective, Seaton finishes with 714 points scored—good for 25th all time. Kolten ends his sophomore season as the career sophomore leader in points scored with 687—already good for 27th all-time in a career. Brian Miles held the old record through a sophomore season of 613. Bob Ford, the all-time points scored leader, is 133 behind Kolten with 554.

For that matter, Sanford's career average of 13.7 per game currently sits at 21st all time, but… I think we all believe that number will rise with time.

Ryan Huebner's 63.5% shooting qualified him for seventh on the all-time single season list. Only Blake English ('99) had ever done better than Ryan's 70% from two point range (minimum of 100 attempts). Huebner finishes his career 4th all-time in career field goal percentage (minimum of 200 attempts) at 60.7%. Ryan finished seventh in another category—Most personal fouls in a season with 83. Seaton finished just behind him with 82 in 8th place.

Sanford attempted 369 shots from the field and that was the 10th most ever attempted in a season. He and Cameron finished #3 and 4 respectively for most three-point shots attempted in a season with 182 and 159. Correspondingly, Sanford finished third for most three point shots made in a season with 68 and Seaton finished fifth all-time with 56. The two also rank 16th and 17th respectively in career three-point percentage made. Kolten has hit 38.2% and Cameron sank 37.7%.

Seaton and Sanford also rank high on other career 'attempts' columns. Cameron took 620 shots from the field in his career—good for 12th most all time. Kolten is at 18th by virtue of having taken 586 shots already. Seaton finished 3rd all time in three-point attempts with 355 and Kolten is in 7th with 288. As you might figure, Seaton ends his career SECOND in most career three-point field goals made with 134 and Kolten ranks 5th on the list with 110.

Kolten's 86 assists tied him for 25th all time on the single season list. His 167 career assists are already good for 16th on the all-time list (Seaton finished 18th all-time with 155). If Sanford were to have another 80 assist season next year, he would enter his senior season already in the top 10 career wise. His career average of 3.3 per game is good for 13th all-time.

Seaton finished 17th all-time in steals with 83. Kolten has 60 in two seasons—another 30 steal season would place him just outside the top 10 entering his senior year.

By virtue of being a three year starter and with this year's team having made a run into the Regionals, Seaton ends up tied for 7th in career games played at North with 73 (among players with 250 points scored or more). Placing in the top 10 for a career games played puts him among the likes of Blake English, Brian Merriweather, Robert Farmer, and some of the great names in Husky basketball history.

Looking back on 2018, this will be the club that is remembered as having come from nowhere to win The Sectional Title.

But those who were there, those who were on the team, those who watched from the stands will always remember this as the team that learned how to win and just refused to lose on their way to becoming "A Team Of Destiny".