

Women's basketball pioneers honored at UAF

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FAIRBANKS — It's no surprise Nanooks women's basketball players Victoria Elleby and Stephanie Toumson asked Linda Dolney for her autograph after Saturday's game.

Forty years ago, Dolney and her teammates paved the way for the current women's basketball team.

That moment in history and several others were recognized Saturday at a remarkable gathering of women.

The pioneer players represented the foundation of women's intercollegiate basketball here. The current team is one that has benefitted from their dedication and passion.

It was no coincidence that the ceremony occurred during a UAF Nanooks versus UAA Seawolves women's basketball game. Those teams played the very first intercollegiate game 40 years ago.

One of the early coaches of some members of that groundbreaking team remembers those years well.

Jim Huston coached from 1969-70 to 1972-73, and it was a different era, he said. The budget for women's basketball was \$800. The men's basketball team had a budget of \$40,000.

"They wore hand-me-down sweats from the men's varsity team," he said. "They looked like bears. It just hung on them."

The women struggled for every bit of gym time they could grab, selling concessions at the men's games to raise money and seeking donations for basketball trips.

Men's basketball players slept in hotels on sports trips. The women took sleeping bags and slept on donated floors.

The thinking back in the 1970s, according to former coach Diann Darnall was that "women aren't really interested in sports."



Honoring Women's Intercollegiate Sports

Former UAF women's basketball players and coaches from the 1970s pose for a picture during halftime of the college women's basketball game between the Alaska Nanooks and the UAA Seawolves Saturday afternoon, February 14, 2015 at the UAF Patty Center. They were being honored for their roles in helping give women's athletics intercollegiate status at UAF.

The 1974-75 women's basketball team showed everyone that was not the case.

Coach Huston said there is a reason he especially loved working with these players.

"I enjoyed it because they didn't take anything for granted," he said. "They played for the love of the game."

And they made history.

One of the women was the first Nanooks basketball player ever — man or woman — to have her jersey retired — Ellen Hannan, No. 33.

She was there Saturday for the special ceremony, recognizing the rededication of her jersey.

Hannan now lives in Craig and helps coach basketball there. She was inducted into the UAF Hall of Fame in 2012.

"This comes full circle to be honored at this event," she said.

"In the 1970s, basketball was a huge part of campus life. There weren't as many options. So there was lots of cohesiveness in the UAF community and lots of students came to games."

Hannan looks at her jersey retirement not so much as a tribute to her own playing, but as a symbol of what the women accomplished.

Hannan admitted it was important to her that this happen at a UAF-UAA women's basketball game.

"I grew up in Anchorage," she said. "But my heart is here."

Six women from that particular team who still live in Fairbanks include Linda Dolney, Shannon Jones, Nancy Cook (Hanson), Diane Kennedy (Hutchison) and Linda Major (Walsh).

The other six players were Carol Carlson, Heidi Hyser, Paula Messer, Etta Ahkivgak, Lori Major and Linda Moffitt.

Moffitt was the player who actually complained in writing to the civil rights office and changed the course of women's basketball at UAF. Reporter Weston Morrow wrote about that in Sunday's News-Miner.

Other women who played in those early years were also at Saturday's event, including Sharon McLeod-Everett.

She grew up in Glennallen and remembers the transition to a five-player team during high school, practicing against the boys.

"Glennallen won state four years in a row against Anchorage schools," said Huston.

Darnall, who spearheaded the evening of recognition, was delighted to bring the two teams together.

She spoke at a reception sponsored by the UAF Alumni Association.

“We are proud that we were able to keep it going so you have what you have now,” she told current players.

She also commended them for their game that night, even though they did not come out on top.

“We are proud of how you played today,” she said. “This team, you stay together and you don’t give up. That’s what we worked for.

“Continue the legacy,” she said. “And make us proud.”

Biggest fan

She didn’t get publicly recognized at Saturday’s basketball game, but she was probably the most dedicated fan in the stands.

Marge Eagan has been going to Fairbanks basketball games — high schools and the University of Alaska Fairbanks — since 1950.

“I just like it,” she said. “I especially love the women’s games, because they are so spirited.”

She started attending high school basketball games before she even had children of her own. But she and her husband had friends who had kids on the team. So they went to the games.

Eventually, her own children played basketball and then her grandchildren. She was a regular supporter at those games.

The only time she doesn’t go, she said, is if she doesn’t like the coach.

Eagan was recognized publicly at one game recently as the oldest audience member. She is 86.

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