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SPORTS

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Emotions run high as Bartlett pays tribute to coach Hunt

By: Craig Brueske



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Sports can serve as a time to get away from some of life's problems -- even for just a few hours.

Last Wednesday night, sports served in that cathartic capacity during Bartlett's girls basketball season opener against Fenton.

A little more than 5 months ago, Hawks girls basketball head coach Brad Hunt passed away suddenly at the age of 43.

Hunt, a health and physical education teacher at Bartlett since 2005, served as an assistant softball coach with head coach Jim Wolfsmith for 13 seasons and was an assistant girls basketball coach under Denise Sarna -- and later Dave Mello -- before taking over as head coach in 2017-18.

During that 2-year span, Hunt guided the Hawks to a 48-15 record, highlighted by the team's Class 4A regional championship victory over Wheaton North on Bartlett's home court last February.

Last week, the Hawks played their first game without their beloved Coach Hunt on the bench.

His presence, however, was definitely felt throughout the gym.

Entering the building a few minutes before tipoff, I quickly noticed both teams wearing white T-shirts with a gold capital B on the front upper left, and the name Hunt and number 25 printed across the back.

"Brad grew up in West Lafayette -- he was a Boilermaker," said Bartlett athletic director Jeff Bral. "There were three things he was proud of -- number one, family. Number two, he was proud to be a Bartlett Hawk, and he was proud of where he came from."

Images of a smiling Hunt could be found in wall photos at both ends of the court -- along with a Bartlett school banner underneath the main scoreboard with the words, "We Miss You, Coach Hunt," in Old Gold lettering.

Prior to the game, Bartlett assistant coach Kurt Andrews spoke on behalf of Hawks junior guard Lexie Sinclair, who wrote a brief tribute to Hunt with the ending words, "you are loved and you are missed."

During player introductions, Hunt's daughter, Madison, and son, Brady, greeted the Hawks' starters and joined in the team's huddle.

In addition, Bral held a ceremonial jump ball at center court, as Madison tipped the ball to her younger brother.

"Tonight is about Brad and his family -- it's about letting them know that this community loved him," said Bral.

The fact that Bartlett's first opponent was Fenton seemed appropriate considering Mello, the former Hawks' coach, is now the Bison head coach.

The game was originally scheduled for Jan. 20.

"I'm happy that we were able to get this set up -- to move it to today," said Mello. "They were supposed to get one home game from their Thanksgiving tournament (at Naperville Central) but that didn't feel like it should be the way to do it. We were more than happy to come here."

Bartlett won the game, 85-35, behind sophomore guard Mackenzie Hare's school-record 43 points.

However, the outcome paled in comparison to the meaning of the entire evening.

"It's tough on all of us but we need this," Bral said of the season opener. "Being able to talk with Emily (Brad's widow) and being able to have the kids be part of the jump ball and player introductions -- they're a part of us forever."

Sinclair, a junior, added 19 points, 9 assists, 8 rebounds and 7 steals, was one of many players visibly shaken following the game.

"There's going to be a lot of firsts and this is one of them," said Sinclair. "There are people that it hits harder because of the relationships he built with everyone. The relationship I had with him was one you couldn't imagine having, so it makes it really hard.

"It's easier once you're on the court but then when you get off the court it hits you again. It's hard because I saw him every day at school -- I saw him every day at practice."

Hare, who poured in 31 first-half points, reflected on the emotional night.

"We just wanted to show him (Coach Hunt) what we have and how much we've improved," said Hare. "It has been really hard. We definitely think about him every day."

The night wasn't easy on anyone, especially new Hawks coach Joe Eirich, who spent the previous 2 years as Hunt's assistant.

"Terrible circumstances -- just terrible," said Eirich. "It's the worst way to be in the position that I'm in.

"This was a great celebration for a great friend of mine. I worked with Brad for seven years. I loved him and his family."

Mello remembered Hunt for his dedication.

"Brad went above and beyond," said Mello. "I'd tell him, 'Hey, we have Hudl, we can get game films from anybody,' and he'd say, 'Coach, I'd like to see them in person to judge their speed and height because you know heights are always listed wrong.'"

"He was all Bartlett. I know he's missed here in the building as a teacher and obviously he's missed here with the girls -- you could see how emotional it was for them."

Fittingly, the Purdue T-shirts worn by the players in pregame warm-ups were donated by Bartlett graduate Nicole Jara (East Bank Club).

"She was one of our first players here," said Bral. "She got the shirts donated and we had someone print them. It's going to go to a scholarship fund for students here at Bartlett High School, and then in April when softball rolls around, we're going to have a walk in his (Hunt's) memory to help raise money for his kids.

"It's the least we can do for what he did for us."

After the game, both teams immediately gathered on the floor to watch a slideshow featuring Hunt and accompanying music that included Tim McGraw's "Humble and Kind," and Purdue's fight song, "Hail Purdue."

The presentation finished with a sign reading, "Forever a legend, our Coach Brad."

As the Hawks' 2019-2020 season continues on, Hunt's memory will linger.

"We know he's still looking down on us," said Sinclair. "He's just coaching us from a different place instead of on the court."