



Brad Emons, Chris McCosky editors/591-2312

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C.J. Risak

A Christmas wish: end winning's appeal

CHRISTMAS BRINGS with it a quality peculiar to humans: Greed.

I'm as gully as the next guy, maybe more so. Given a choice between more or less, I'll opt for more, more often than not.

I can sit through two hours of "A Christmas Carol," remarking what a greedy guy that Scrooge was, then in the same breath say, "Com'on, there's a two-for-one sale at K mart."

Doesn't matter what twos are on sale. Doesn't matter if I need them or not. Two toilet brushes, two left shoes, erp, even two bowling balls (ahem).

MORE, MORE, MORE. Sports are no different. I can never get enough. I spend my working hours writing about it. I spend my leisure hours watching it. I spend my sleeping hours wondering why I spend so much time dwelling on it.

Still, I'm no fanatic. At least I don't consider myself one.

I indulge in sports, but I'm no hog. While I enjoy playing, I don't necessarily have to win all the time, like certain folks I know.

Those are the people that get me steamed. The type that practice one or two sports a year until they can whip the tar out of you without breaking a sweat.

You think you're doing a pal a favor when he calls you and says he needs someone to hit against. Sure, you answer, believing that your buddy means tennis. Then, after an hour of stopping balls with your chest, legs, arms — everything but your racket — you just watch as your so-called friend saunters off court, saying, "Well, thanks anyway."

They call it competition. I call it greed.

MORE, MORE, MORE. A win here or there is never enough for these people. All the time they insist on improving. Win, win, win — that's all they think about.

Winning's like a drug. It's addictive. Once you start, people figure you should do it all the time. "How could you lose to those boys?" they'll demand. If you insist on being a winner, you'd better understand you'll never again be human.

Because winners are like robots. Program them and they'll just keep winning, with monotonous regularity. How dull.

Really, don't you ever get bored reading about Ed Kavanaugh's Livonia Ladywood basketball teams? Or Mike Lane's Bloomfield Hills Andover girl swimmers?

Then there's John Herrington — always smiling after another championship for his Farmington Harrison football team. And Tim Storch, beaming after Troy Athens claims the state soccer title — again.

Geez, how greedy can you get?

THEY ALL say the same things after winning by 40 points or four touchdowns or 14 goals, too. "They're having a down year," they mercifully bestow upon their foes.

How do they know? Did they ever stop to think that, maybe, these people choose to be mediocre? Is that so terrible? I don't think so. In this age of specialization, with athletes concentrating all their efforts into becoming powerful in one sport, I have chosen to be mediocre — I prefer to call it "adequate" — in lots of sports.

While others concern themselves with winning in one or two sports a year, I might, in a given week, run or row, shoot baskets or shoot golf.

To the modern athlete, this is heresy. The day of the four-sport letterwinner is past.

Not that my day ever arrived.

THE POINT IS, I'm willing to be generous with my mediocrity. I'm not greedy. I'll share my defeats with the more fortunate.

That's what this country needs: people who have the drive to be mediocre, whose ultimate goal is to be .500. They won't accept anything more.

This is a rare breed, difficult to find. So many are blinded by greed, all they envision is winning, despite their lack of talent.

Not me. Talent never stood between me and losing.

Winning's overrated, anyway. The same people who expect you to win all the time can never understand how you can be a poor loser. But if you never lose, how are you supposed to learn?

MEDIOCRITY IS like walking a tightrope. It's true. One slip and you're addicted to winning, or you plunge into losing.

The key is not to care too much, but don't stop caring, either. Apathy is for losers. You have to really want to be mediocre.

A winning team looks good when it wins. A losing team looks lousy when it loses. A mediocre team looks good, no matter what.

I know it won't do much good, but I hope those coaches — Kavanaugh, Lane, Herrington, Storch and the others like them — read this. Not that they'll understand it.

To help them, I've amended my annual Christmas letter to Santa. No more wishes for another Emily Wagner or John Miller to help them stockpile victories.

I thought about asking Santa to saddle these coaches with mediocre talent, but I've seen what they can do. They brainwash the best of the average into believing they can win and — presto! — these former middle-of-the-packer are transformed into greedy win-boarders.

No, that kind of challenge just makes devout winners even greedier. Instead, I'll ask Mr. Claus to give them a calm, peaceful, serene new year, void of urbane.

Let's see them try to win with that monkey riding on their back!

Mercy free throws ice Rocks



Salem guard Reggie Rojeski drives on Mercy's Bev White in Wednesday night's thrilling state quarterfinal game. Mercy held off a feisty challenge from Salem, 49-45 in overtime.

BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

By Chris McCosky staff writer

Wonder what kind of reception Annette Ruggiero received when she got back to her Plymouth home Wednesday night?

The senior point guard led her Farmington Hills Mercy basketball team to a successful, if not electrifying, 49-45 overtime victory against Plymouth Salem in the state Class A quarterfinals at Southfield.

The large crowd had spilled out of the stands and had encircled the court by the time the overtime period commenced. Yet Ruggiero, forever in control, confidently sank six straight free throws to bury a very game Salem team.

"We had a girl walk up to the line with ice in her veins and win the game," said Mercy coach Larry Baker. "She was wearing a Mercy uniform."

Baker was trying to make a point. Plymouth Salem, a team less gifted in terms of size, strength and speed, gave the Marlinas all they wanted and then some. Baker acknowledged their effort, but he wanted to make sure everyone realized who the eventual winner was.

"I KNEW in my heart that if we could not create some distance in the second and third quarters, we'd be in for a nailbiter," Baker said. "In a tight game, in the state quarterfinals, it gets increasingly harder to shoot."

"I am not surprised it was close. But I'm not about to apologize for winning a quarterfinal game. Salem plays great defense but, look, we played it a little better tonight. The scoreboard says we won by 4 points."

Indeed, but there was no overlooking the tremendous effort displayed by Salem.

"I told the (Mercy) kids this," Baker said. "I have seen the other six teams that are left (in the state tournament). None will play better defense than Salem did tonight."

Fred Thomann's finely tuned Salem club had an answer to everything Mercy threw at them. The Rocks knew Mercy's out-of-bounds plays by rote. They knew Mercy's patterns on offense well enough to consistently shut off passing lanes and beat the Marlinas to the basket. The Rocks prevented Mercy from running its vaunted fastbreak.

"Our team defense was just fantastic," said an emotionally drained, yet immensely proud Thomann. "The key was Kendra Hostynski. She just did a superb job on (Mercy center Mary) Rosowski."

DESPITE GIVING UP five inches in height to Rosowski, Hostynski limited the potential all-stafer to 10 points (only 2 in the second half) and managed to score 8 key points herself.

But Rosowski was not totally ineffective far from it. She pulled down 12 rebounds and did a credible job on Salem's freshman sensation Denis Head.

"Fred (Thomann) said that rebounding would be a key in this game," Baker said. "And despite their fine defense, and all the things they were able to do, Amy (DeMatia), Mary (Rosowski) and Terri (Ford) still got the job done on the boards."

DeMatia contributed eight rebounds and Ford six. Head pulled down nine for Salem, Hostynski six.

Mercy outscored Salem 10-6 on second-shot baskets.

The free-throw line ultimately led to Salem's defeat. Salem hit five of 12 free throws, Mercy 21 of 31. Salem was called for 20 fouls to Mercy's 10.

SALEM, WHICH trailed throughout the game, took a 35-24 lead on Reggie Rojeski's hoop with 5:25 left to play.

With 3:03 left, and the Marlinas leading 42-40, Baker decided to hold the ball out and take some time off the clock.

Salem fouled Bev White (who scored 5 crucial points in the final quarter) with 1:12 left and she hit one of two. Rojeski matched her free throw at the other end, and with 58 seconds left, Mercy led 43-41.

Salem's Mary Beth West forced a turnover at midcourt and then, with 15 seconds left, drained a 17-footer to tie the game.

Mercy called a timeout to set up its final play — their "quickie play." It was the play Mercy used Friday to beat Murray-Wright at the buzzer. Salem, though, had all the exits guarded and Mercy never fired its final shot.

But Ruggiero, born and raised in Plymouth, made sure the Marlinas were going to Kalamazoo. Her six free throws were more than the Rocks could overcome.

On the night, Ruggiero scored 21 points (13 of 14 from the free throw line), and dished out four assists.

Head scored 13 for Salem. West added 11.

The Rocks finish at 21-5 and with the undying respect of their head coach.

"I have been coaching for 20 years," Thomann said. "I have never been as proud of a team as I am of these kids. They accepted the challenge of playing one of the best teams in the state and did everything they could possibly do to win."

Mercy will go on to face the winner of the Benton Harbor-Swartz Creek quarterfinal game at 8 p.m. Friday at Kalamazoo Hackett High School.

Hawks sloppy but get victory over Pats

By Scott Adler staff writer

For Farmington Harrison, Tuesday night's basketball game was like eating pudding with your fingers. It's messy, but it still tastes good.

The Hawks experienced the sweet taste of victory over host Livonia Franklin, 62-46, but they did it in a very sloppy fashion.

"We played better our first game (a 55-48 loss to North Farmington) than we did tonight," Harrison coach Mike Teachman said. "We made some bad passes but I think if we'd been fresh we would've made the plays. They were mainly third mistakes."

Coach Jim McIntyre said his Patriots' passes just weren't there.

"We're much too inconsistent," he said of his team's offense. "We just don't get it going for four quarters. In the past, our passes were missed because our guys were moving too fast. Now (the passes) aren't even getting to the open man."

THE PATRIOTS JUMPED out to a 15-3 lead with 2:40 left in the first quarter. They failed to score, however, for the remainder of the quarter and hit only 3 field goals in the entire second period.

In the meantime, Harrison pulled out to a 25-23 lead with 3:30 left in the first half and never trailed again.

Junior point guard Ken George and forward Vince Enright led the Hawk's charge in the second quarter, combining for 23 of Harrison's 29 points.

Harrison led a 36-29 halftime advantage.

"We settled down on offense after the slow start," Teachman said. "We were playing too much one-on-one and we weren't getting back on defense. We spread out their defense and reversed the ball a lot."

The third quarter was only the beginning of Franklin's troubles. The Patriots stayed in the game in the second quarter thanks to 9 points from the charity stripe. In the third period, Franklin was awarded only 2 free throws and 2 field goals.

The Patriots were 3-for-6 from the line in the second half.

"WE HAVEN'T shot well," McIntyre said. "In the past, we were always small, gritty and shot well. Right now, we don't have any outside shooters. It has to improve, and until it does, it could be a long season."

Franklin is also waiting for Tim McGillevray and Dave Jones to return from ankle injuries that have kept them out of uniform the entire season. The two starters are expected to return after Christmas.

Falcons win 2 OT thriller

Greg Feenstra got to wear the hero's hat for the Farmington boys basketball team after he led them to a thrilling 54-50 double-overtime victory Tuesday against West Bloomfield.

Feenstra followed up a missed shot with a clutch hoop late in the final quarter to tie the score at 46. Both teams missed free throw opportunities in the final seconds and the game went into OT.

Farmington's Dwayne Kratt and Bloomfield's Tom Warnicke traded hoops in the first 3-minute extra period.

Then Feenstra took over. He scored 4 of Farmington's 6 points in the second OT period and the Falcons earned their first win of the season. He finished with 14 points, second to teammate Bruce Kratt's 15.

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