

# Girls’ basketball numbers on the decline

By Paige Happ

The head coach for the girls’ basketball team, Ross DeLong, has noticed a decline in numbers for girls’ basketball state-wide for a while now.

“The state of Iowa is now aware there is a problem,” said Coach DeLong. “Unfortunately it took programs throughout the state to cancel seasons to get their attention.”

Five schools in Iowa have canceled their girls’ basketball season this year, including Central City, Charles City, Clarion-Goldfield/Dows, Sibley-Ocheyedan, and West Sioux, according to a November website article from *Sports Illustrated*.

Closer to home, three schools in the River Valley South Conference do not have girls’ JV teams this year: Wilton, Tipton, and West Liberty.

Durant plays each team in the RVC twice meaning the Wildcats canceled six JV conference games for the season.

Some programs also have limited their JV teams to only play two quarters due to low numbers on their teams as well.

However, Durant JV Coach Mary Huesmann said her team added six replacement games to the schedule, including two games each with Alburnett and Central DeWitt and two more games in a tournament at Mediapolis.

Sophomore Bailey Scott feels frustrated with the cancellation of her JV team’s games.

“It is frustrating because games are getting canceled, and the school has to find a different school at the last minute for us to play,” she said.

“When the games are on different

nights, sometimes JV doesn’t get to watch varsity, which is also upsetting.”

Coach DeLong and Coach Huesmann see similar factors that play into the low numbers in girls’ basketball.

“Club volleyball and girls’ wrestling are the top reasons in my opinion,” said Coach DeLong.

“If you look at Durant and get the numbers of participants for both basketball and volleyball in the last five years, there is a big difference.”

The decline in girls’ basketball has been more evident in the past years while the participation in volleyball has been noticeably higher.

Coach DeLong also sees more opportunities for volleyball players than basketball players.

“The number of club volleyball teams and tournaments seems to increase every year,” said Coach DeLong.

“I don’t believe there are nearly as many options for basketball.”

As more girls also specialize in one sport, they may choose to not go out for girls’ basketball. However, Coach Huesmann wants to emphasize the importance of multi-sport athletes and the benefits.

“We encourage multi-sport athletes,” she said.

“For athletes interested in competing at the next level, it is understood college coaches value multi-sport athletes. They want to see athletes performing in sports in which they are less comfortable. Participating in multiple sports vs specializing also reduces overuse injuries.”

A losing team may also convince girls not to go out, according to Coach De-

Long.

“When you are going multiple years without winning games, fewer and fewer girls will want to play,” said Coach DeLong.

Scott sees the length of the four-month basketball seasons, which extends over two school breaks, may also figure into the decrease in participation.

“Since the season is longer, it could lead to students not going out because they are getting burned out from the long season with little to no breaks,” said Scott.

Durant’s girls’ basketball program has always been able to field a JV and varsity team.

In previous years, the Wildcats also had enough players for fresh/soph games. That has not been possible for three years now.

Coach DeLong believes that JV and fresh/soph teams are important keys to success at the varsity level.

“Not having lower level programs will negatively affect your upper levels,” said Coach DeLong.

“You need to have some success for good participation.”

The Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union has instituted a new rule for the season allowing a girl to play a full JV game and a full varsity game and have it count as just one game toward her 21-game limit, according to Coach DeLong.

“The rule change was obviously needed in hopes of maintaining full JV schedules alongside varsity schedules,” said Coach DeLong.

Coach DeLong, however, would not allow one of his players to play two full



Photo by Royce Richman  
Senior Emma Meincke dribbles down the court Jan. 7 during a home game against Wilton.

games in one night and follows the old rule of allowing a girl to play six quarters only, adding “that’s more than enough, and any more than that could create injury or burn-out.”

In the short term, Coach DeLong is worried other Iowa schools may also cancel their girls’ basketball programs. Overall, he is still hopeful.

“My fear is that you may see some others in the near future, but ultimately I’m optimistic that we can get this turned around,” he said.

# Retired federal prosecutor finds home with basketball team



Photo by Garrett Pearlman  
Durant assistant basketball coach Cliff Cronk talks with other coaches before a game.

By Lauren Callison

Seventy-year-old Cliff Cronk came to Durant to coach basketball with his son Michael three seasons ago.

However, Cliff, who spent 40 years as a state and federal prosecutor, retired from the U.S. District Attorney’s Office in Davenport two seasons ago to continue coaching the Wildcat boys’ basketball teams even after his son left the coaching staff.

A friend first introduced Cliff Cronk to basketball in 10th grade, and he fell in love with it.

“Until I got married and started raising a family, I played as often as I could,” he said.

His son Michael, the youngest of three children, ended up sharing the same love for basketball.

“Since he was young, he and I have spent hours and hours playing, practicing, and watching games, players, and coaches, learning more about the game,” Cliff said.

As for coaching, it runs deep in the Cronk family.

“My grandfathers were coaches and one of them was a school teacher who coached high school varsity basketball in a small, Iowa town,” he said. “I have brothers, cousins, and nephews who coach or have coached football, baseball, and hockey.”

His son Michael also inherited the coaching gene.

“He coached basketball summer camps while he was in high school, volunteer coached at Ballard High School in his senior year at Iowa State University in 2019, and took a teaching job after his college graduation at Ottumwa and built up their basketball program there,” he said.

Michael eventually moved back to Bettendorf and took a teaching position at Durant High School in 2022. He joined the varsity boys’ basketball coaching squad as an assistant and was the JV coach.

Cliff had watched many of his son’s basketball games at Ballard and Ottumwa but had never coached himself.

Seeing Michael coach made Cliff eager to get closer to the game again. He decided he wanted to help coach the Wildcats with his son.

“I thought it would be better than sitting in the stands and watching,” Cliff said. “We would get more time together, and it would create great memories.”

Due to his job as a federal prosecutor in Davenport, Cliff would have to make some changes, and his son wasn’t sold on the idea right away.

“He [Michael] told me he would see what he could do about getting me on the staff on one condition: I had to be ‘all in’,” Cliff said. “I had to commit to attending every team event, every game, and every practice.”

He came to terms with that, and soon enough, previous Head Coach Matt Straube welcomed Cliff to the staff as a JV and varsity assistant coach.

In order to be ‘all in’, Cliff had to sacrifice time at work for time in the gym working with the players.

“I had to leave work early, and before I could do that, I would have to make sure all my cases in court were handled,” he said.

Along with the other staff, Cliff helped with scouting opponents, lineups, and game strategies before and during games.

“A big change for me was having Mikey as my boss instead of the other way around,” he said. “Of course I wanted Mikey to be successful, and he had more experience than me, so it was easy to support him.”

Michael respected his dad’s insight and knowledge of the game to help better the program he was already helping build.

“He has passion for basketball, his students and his players, and I got to see that close up,” Cliff said.

“I feel very happy to have had that season with him.”

Senior Bryce Daufeldt played for the Cronks in 2022 on JV and got to experience a year of them coaching together.

“They both are very great coaches, and they both know and love the game of basketball,” said Daufeldt, who leads the varsity Wildcats in rebounds this season and is the team’s second leading scorer. Following the 2022-2023 season, Michael decided to leave his job in Durant and pursue other opportunities. He landed in Ames and is currently the tournament director of the All Iowa Attack basketball program

“After Mikey announced he was leaving, Coach Straube asked if I was leaving too,” Cliff said.

“I knew it would be different without Mikey, but it was not a difficult decision. I enjoyed being part of the basketball program, and I decided to stay.”

Before the season started without Michael, Cliff decided to retire from his job.

“I knew retiring would allow more time to devote to the basketball team and stay involved in something I loved,” he said.

Throughout his over 40-year career as a prosecutor, Cliff spent time in Colorado, Texas, and Washington D.C. handling many serious crimes and bringing criminals to court, but he found a home in the Durant

basketball program.

“All of last season I worked closely with the new JV coach Curtis Lilienthal, Jay Feuerbach the F/S coach, and Coach Straube,” he said. “I got to know the players better, and I learned more and more.”

Last year’s team did not have the success they were hoping for, suffering through a winless season.

“The players worked very hard and we all got better,” Cliff explained. “I am so glad I was part of it.”

After the 2023-2024 season, Coach Straube decided it was time for him to step down as the varsity basketball coach, and new Head Coach Chris Timmerman replaced him.

“He [Coach Straube] made sure I knew I had a place if I wanted to come back,” Cliff said. “Again, that was an easy decision.”

Cliff said he has been lucky to work with some great coaches, including his son, in his time at Durant.

“I miss coaching with him [Michael] very much, and all of the other coaches for Durant have also been great people who want to teach basketball the right way,” he said.

The Wildcats face a tough conference again this year, but Cliff is hopeful.

“Every week I see our team and our players getting better,” he said.

“Our experience and our ability to compete makes this season special. We have dedicated players who want to learn, improve, and compete, and they are willing to work to achieve these things.”

Daufeldt couldn’t imagine the team without Cliff and is happy he stayed with the program.

“Cliff brings energy to the team and always believes in us,” he said.

“I think we all feel very fortunate that he retired to be closer to the team even though the reason he came, left.”