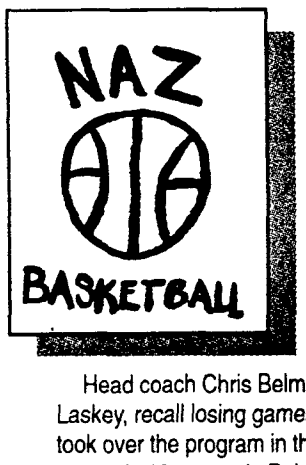
MOVE on the

Taking aim at history

Story by Mike Latona • Photos by Greg Francis



Winning has become so natural for Rochelle Cherry, she said, "It feels like getting up in the morning."

But until recently, the basketball program at Nazareth Academy — where Rochelle stars — had seemingly taken longer than Rip Van Winkle to awake from its slumber and rise to Section 5 supremacy.

Head coach Chris Belmont and his assistant, Jane Laskey, recall losing games by up to 50 points when they took over the program in the 1993-94 season. Nazareth won only 13 games in Belmont's first two years, and the school's previous best single-season record was ".500 at best," he said.

Times have definitely changed: Nazareth now has a No. 1 seed in the Section 5 basketball playoffs for the first time in school history.

Nazareth Academy's Rochelle Cherry, left, and Catherine Brant warm up prior to the start of a Feb. 9 against East High School.

With a 19-1 record, the Lasers have earned a first-round bye in Class B. They were scheduled to play a quarterfinal game on Friday, Feb. 26, against either No. 8 Bath-Haverling or No. 9 Wellsville.

Should the Lasers take home a title, it will be the first sectional crown in *any* sport in school history. Rochelle, for one, would relish the chance to make that distinction.

"At the beginning of the year, our goal wasn't to be undefeated all year long. It was to win sectionals," Rochelle remarked.

The Lasers' rise began in the 1995-96 season, when they finished with a 17-4 record. One year later, they reached the sectional Final Four for the first time. Last season they went one step further, advancing to the title game before falling to Marcus Whitman.

Earlier this season, Nazareth beat Marcus Whitman, 54-41; in a Dec. 18 rematch. Among their many other impressive wins were thumpings of two Monroe County League powers: 67-53 over Greece Athena on Dec. 19, and 44-31 over Pittsford Mendon on Dec. 28.

In addition, Batavia Notre Dame and Fillmore were undefeated during the regular season except for losses to Nazareth. The Lasers' only blemish has been a 53-49 upset loss to Corning East of Section 4 on Jan. 30.

Nazareth has already tied a school record for wins in a season, set last year. The 1998-99 Lasers have also been state-ranked for the first time ever, reaching No. 13 in Class B last week.

According to Belmont, the Lasers' rise in supremacy can be traced to a high commitment level by his current players.

"They don't miss practice much, whereas in my first year they did," Belmont commented.

Rochelle said that the team has benefited from a more intensified strength and conditioning regimen, thanks to the addition of donated equipment and a volunteer trainer. In fact, she said she overheard an opposing coach berating her players during halftime of a lopsided Lasers win:

"She was going, 'Do you know why they're getting up and down the court better than you? Because they're in shape!'" recalled Rochelle, a center who goes by the nickname "Cherry Bomb."

Nazareth commands attention as soon as it enters a gym. Bianca Watson, the team's second-leading scorer, summed up other teams' initial reaction to the 6-foot-2½-inch Rochelle: "We come in and they're like, 'She's *tall!*'"

"Then Meredith comes in and they say, 'They've got another one,'" Laskey added, referring to 6-foot-0 forward Meredith Craig.

Opponents might take another gulp upon discovering that Nazareth will return its entire starting lineup next year. Rochelle and Meredith are juniors, as are two guards, Jennifer Kamm and Bianca. The fifth starter, guard Meghan Dahlman, is only an eighth-grader.

Team members have already set several individual school records this season. Rochelle, who is averaging a team-high 16.6 points and 13.0 rebounds per game, is already Nazareth's career leader in points (938) and rebounds (780). And Jennifer, with 110 assists, has broken the single-season mark.

Rochelle, in addition to her size, has excellent agility: She leads Nazareth in blocks, with 87; and steals, with 38. That might account for the Division I college coaches who have already begun attending Nazareth games.

"She's definitely a force," Belmont said.

Nazareth also enjoys a "sixth man" advantage: with its tiny gym, opponents can develop sudden cases of claustrophobia, Jennifer observed.

"They're not used to everyone being so close. Everybody's right in your face," Jennifer remarked.

The gym's limited seating space was not much of a problem until the Lasers began winning regularly, Laskey noted.

"We've had a lot more (fans) come in off the street, not just moms and dads," Laskey said. "The recognition is outside of Nazareth."

"Now that we're setting the standard, other people want to come," Rochelle added.

Nazareth players Bianca Watson and Stephanie Herbst catch their breath during the Lasers 72-47 win over East.

Meghan Dahlman, right, blocks the shot of an East opponent during the Feb. 9 home game.

Coming next week: Horoscopes

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