

Teen never tires of basketball

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

This past winter, most days for Lizzie Rhoda involved practicing and playing for her Gates-Chili High School basketball team. She also squeezed in weekly practices and games as a Catholic Youth Organization coach. Even though she devotes so much time to the sport, she doesn't fear basketball burnout.

"Not at all. I love it," the 17-year-old stated. "Basketball has been my outlet. School gets tough, but basketball is always fun for me."

Lizzie recently finished her third year of CYO coaching at her parish, St. Pius Tenth in Chili. This past season she was co-coach of the grade 7-8 team, which advanced all the way to the championship game of the Monroe County CYO Tournament.

Lizzie said her start in coaching stemmed from a desire to pass on some tips to her younger sister, Maggie. Next thing Lizzie knew, she was assisting with Maggie's grade 5-6 CYO squad, which she helped coach for two seasons. Maggie was also on this year's grade 7-8 team.

Even though only a few years' age difference existed between Lizzie and the girls she coached, she said she earned their respect by striking

a balance between fun and work.

"I can joke around with them, but when I say 'OK, it's time to learn,' they'll say 'OK, fine,'" and the next 20 minutes they know we're going to work," Lizzie said, adding that she led by example by playing right along with her team: "That's the best way for them to learn."

Lizzie's caring side was evident through her ritual of making individualized good-luck cards before CYO contests. "There was one game I had to miss because I was looking at a college, and one girl said 'We couldn't play without the cards.' It cracked me up," Lizzie said.

She also established "Paper Plate Awards" for the goofier moments that occurred. For instance, Lizzie recalled, "One day at practice someone asked where Chili Avenue was. Well, we were at St. Pius School — and that's on Chili Avenue."

Last fall Lizzie was named a diocesan Hands of Christ Award recipient for outstanding service in church, school and community. In nominating her for the award, Stephen Quinn, her co-coach at St. Pius Tenth, praised her contributions: "Her vibrant personality, and all-around good nature, make her a true asset to the program. ... Lizzie is the type of

person you would want your daughter to emulate," Quinn wrote.

As a player, Lizzie recently finished her third year on the Gates-Chili High School varsity team, starting at the forward position this past season. She was also a cross-country athlete in the fall, and has been a flutist in the Gates-Chili concert band and a drum majorette in the marching band.

Following graduation in June, Lizzie plans to major in civil engineering in college. Her recent short list of schools included Notre Dame, Villanova and Clarkson.

She won't pursue playing college basketball, but hopes to continue her coaching pursuits — perhaps even finding a parish near her college that's looking for a CYO coach. Lizzie sees coaching as a potential lifelong activity; in fact, she owns books written by University of Notre Dame women's coach Muffet McGraw as well as Duke University's men's coach Mike Krzyzewski.

However, she's not particularly interested in becoming a big-time coach such as McGraw or Krzyzewski. "I think fourth-graders tend to be funnier. Older kids tend to take themselves seriously. Coaching college and high school, there's going to be a



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier
Gates-Chili High School senior Lizzie Rhoda looks to pass during a recent game against Rush-Henrietta. Lizzie also serves as a CYO basketball coach.

lot of ego involved," she explained.

More important to Lizzie than prestige is the simple joy of coaching. "It doesn't matter what level. I think it's the same feeling of fulfillment," she said.

Lizzie's greatest fulfillment is this: "Having the little kids come back and say 'I love to play basketball.'"

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