A tradition of winning

Basketball success spans generations

Eric Narcisse
enarcisse@theadvertiser.com

IOTA — North of Crowley on La. 98 is Iota, a small town with a population less than 1,600, one gas station and no red lights.

Although the town may not have any big industrial plants, it does have one of the best high school girls basketball programs in the state — the Iota Lady Bulldogs.

In their existence, the Lady Bulldogs have won two state championships, finished runner-up three times and have made 13 Sweet 16 appearances.

“We have great tradition when it comes to girls basketball at Iota,” Acadia Parish School Board member Milton Simar said. “Every girls basketball player in our area wants to get involved. They all dream of one day being a Lady Bulldog.”

Lady Bulldogs coach Stan Baggett, who has led this year’s team to a 35-0 record, a No. 19 national ranking in the USA Today’s Super 25 and a No. 1-ranking in the state in Class 2A, agreed.

“It’s all about the tradition,” Baggett said. “I have never taken a poll, but I’d say that your average girl’s parent in Iota would love for their daughter to be a Lady Bulldogs basketball player.”

Former player Shelly Hebert, who was a member of the 1991-92 state championship team, described the Lady Bulldogs basketball tradition between mother and daughter to that of a father’s desire to have his son follow in his footsteps as a football player.

“Iota High School basketball player Ashlyn Baggett is introduced at the start of a game in Iota.

“You can’t coach a kid to grow tall, but these kids have big hearts.”

— Fred Cart, parent of four former Lady Bulldogs
We have so many parents who played basketball for the Lady Bulldogs,” said Hebert, who is now a physics and chemistry teacher at Iota, “that they just pass that love on down to their daughters. So the tradition just continues.”

Guard Melissa Short, who is the only senior on this year’s Lady Bulldogs team, said Lady Bulldogs basketball is a big part of her family.

“Basketball has always been a part of my family,” Short said, “and being a Lady Bulldogs basketball player was an expectation in my family. If I have a daughter, and I’m still living in Iota, I’m going to want her to play also.”

But how does a small town like Iota, whose high school has a student enrollment of 450, consistently produce dominant girls basketball teams?

“Our kids are always disciplined and extremely dedicated,” said Joyce LeBrum, who played for Lady Bulldogs from 1951-55. “We always have a great bunch of kids and good coaches. These kids want to be great. And because of that, they miss out on other fun things just so they can practice.”

Simar, who is the great-uncle of current Lady Bulldogs Angel and Justine, agreed.

“We are a small and country town,” Simar said. “But that’s an advantage for us because the work ethic of every girl basketball player in our town is tremendous. The dedication of these girls is overwhelming.”

Fred Cart, who has four daughters (Kay, Francis, Erin, Ashley and Megan) play for the Lady Bulldogs from 1986-2003, said Iota basketball team lives up to their community’s motto: “Small community, big heart.”

“This is a special program,” Cart said. “You can’t coach a kid to grow tall, but these kids have big hearts.”

Although there’s no denying the scrappiness of Lady Bulldogs basketball teams, another major factor in the program’s success has been Lil Dribblers, a youth basketball league that provides kids an opportunity to start playing at six years old.

“Lil Dribblers has been extremely important to our success,” Baggett said. “To have kids practicing basketball at such a young age is priceless. You can’t put a price on how valuable it is for kids to play a sport at ages five and six.”

Simar said he’s heard elementary students talk about one day being a Lady Bulldog.

“There are kids in the second and third grades who are already talking about how they can’t wait until they get to high school,” Simar said. “That’s because of the girls basketball tradition here.”

Junior forward Candace LaCombe, who is one of the many three-point threats for the Lady Bulldogs, said the experience gained from Lil Dribblers has been key to today’s success.

“Lil Dribblers is really valuable,” LaCombe said. “I can tell you, if we wouldn’t have started so young, we wouldn’t have the skills that we have today.”

tryouts for Lil Dribblers were held Thursday. Gabrielle Romero and Alex Miller, both fifth-graders at St. Francis, are two of the many players in attendance, who aspire to one day wear the maroon and gold.

“I want to be an Iota Lady Bulldog,” said Romero an 11-year-old point guard. “I love watching them play, because I learn so much from them. I’m very excited about being a future Lady Bulldog.”

“I look forward to one day playing for Iota,” said the 16-year-old Miller, who is the younger sister of Lady Bulldogs star Angel Miller.

Above, the current Iota team applauds for former state champions during a halftime ceremony. At left, the current Iota girls team greets former state champion teams after a ceremony honoring the former champions. Iota has many fine teams that the current team is trying to emulate. Below, current Iota High teacher Shelly Hebert is a former player on a team that won a state championship.