

Prison Basketball: A Game of Confinement

Michigan City, Indiana - February 11, 2008

Nick Dettmann

The News-Dispatch

MICHIGAN CITY - Joey Welch and Mark Gardner didn't know what to expect Tuesday. They were nervous. Gardner, the coach of Bethel College's junior varsity men's basketball team, led Welch and his 11 teammates inside the walls of the Indiana State Prison to play a basketball game. For many, it was their first visit to a maximum-security prison. "It's a little intimidating when you're walking in," Welch said. "But once you start playing, it's another basketball game." Bethel College has competed against the state prison squad for nearly two decades, in what has become a yearly tradition. Bethel uses the game as a community outreach program, giving its players an opportunity to learn a valuable life lesson. "It was a good experience," Gardner said. "A little nervous coming over. You could see it on the guys' faces, they were kind of nervous. Not sure how physical to play. But it was a fun experience, a real rewarding experience. "Especially just hanging out afterwards, talking to the guys, interacting with them, find out how long they're in for, where they went to high school. ... I think it's a good outreach for the school to get out and show these guys a part of life they might not otherwise see. ... It's been a good relationship." ISP recreation leader Kevin Donaldson said the inmates, of which there are around 2,000, get this opportunity to use it as a rehab tool. He wants to use this program as a way of developing inmates into quality citizens for when they get out of prison. But it is hard to ignore the makeup of the team. Composing the roster for Tuesday's contest were players with a combined eight murder convictions, two cases of attempted murder, three cases of armed robbery and one case of dealing cocaine and narcotics. At least nine of the players are not scheduled to be released until after 2021. Some have been in prison since they were 18 or 19 years old. In addition, the scorekeeper, the timer, the two referees, the coaches and the video camera operator (the game can be watched later on closed-circuit television), are all inmates. "The whole experience of some of these guys never being in a prison before, or a jail," said Gardner about why he was nervous. "The walk over, we had to go room by room and the doors shut behind you before the doors in front of you open. Things we take for granted every day." Because of that and how prisons are often portrayed, Donaldson said teams he contacts are skeptical and scared to come inside the state prison. So getting teams willing to come in and play is often a challenge. Sometimes upwards of 70 phone calls and/or letters are sent to schools or recreation teams asking if they'd be willing to come and play. The prison team only plays about 12-15 games per year. "For them to come in is a good experience for us," said Thomas Fondren, an ISP state team member who's in prison on an armed robbery conviction. "... It's getting us reacclimated to go back into society with some positives on our minds. ... It shows a lot of integrity with the (inmates) by coming together and playing together as a team." Another inmate, Raymond Powell, who's serving time for a murder conviction in 1996, added that it means a lot when teams do come in and play them. "It does wonders for the young men," said Winston Garland, another one of the recreation leaders at ISP. "It does wonders for the cell houses. It has this trickle-down effect, almost like being the big man on campus." In addition, when

opposing teams do play the "state team," as they're called, Donaldson said those teams have no idea what they're going to go up against. The state team plays a similar style of basketball to that of the Phoenix Suns: Lots of running up and down the court, an uptempo, run-and-gun style with heavy pressure. The players on the state team typically play Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays for at least two hours. "For the most part, it's been a great experience," Garland said. "You've got a group of 12 or 13 that come together four or five days out of the week, bust their tail, work real hard and try to get better at the game. It's a great group of guys. ... We've had some good teams come in here. We're always grateful." Getting onto the team takes a few requirements: The inmates must have a clean behavior record for at least one full year, and either be enrolled in school inside the prison or have a job, such as being a carpenter and building furniture. Players also usually have to try out. ----- The setting of the game surprised many of the Bethel players and Gardner. One of the first things they noticed was all the recreation equipment inside the building, which was small, old and cold. But inside the building was weightlifting equipment, card tables, telephones, pool tables, foosball tables and video games. And not just any video games, but Madden '07. "I didn't expect to see Madden '07," Gardner said. The basketball court, on one end, has a large black fence along one baseline and one sideline. On the other baseline were the benches, scoreboard operator and scorekeeper. The other sideline had a number of bleachers, about five rows deep up against the wall, with tables next to the court. The Bethel players used an office as their locker room. J.T. Hooks and Derek Moser both played against the ISP squad last year, a game which Bethel won. Both said they remember enjoying the experience and couldn't wait to get back this year. "It was almost as fun as the first time," said Hooks of his second visit. "... The first time, I was definitely nervous." Hooks added it's no different than any other basketball game. Moser said Tuesday he wishes they would come over more often. So did Gardner. "I think there's a mutual respect for what they're trying to do in here," Gardner said. On Saturday, Gardner said Bethel and ISP have agreed to play each other twice next year. Bethel led for much of the early part of the game. In fact, it led by as many as 10 at 18-8 with 15:34 to go in the first half. The games are played in two 20-minute halves. With about seven minutes remaining in the first half, Bethel held its last lead when Hooks hit a 3-pointer to give Bethel a 29-28 edge. Moments later, the state team took the lead back after a 3-pointer by Raymond Powell, who is in on a 60-year murder sentence. The game was tied at halftime at 46. In the second half, the state squad scored the first six points, including an authoritative dunk by Quincy Stamps in front of Hooks. For the rest of the day, Hooks became the target of jokes for both sides. The state team led the rest of the way from there, and the uptempo play eventually wore down the boys from Bethel. When the buzzer sounded to end the game, which was won by the state squad 96-73, each player gave a handshake or high five to a player on the other team, and there was a renowned confidence about the experience for Gardner and Welch, and many of the other first-timers for Bethel. "They appreciate us coming," Gardner said. "My guys said it was probably the nicest group of guys we played against all year." Gardner encouraged schools or teams that have considered it or signed up and later backed out because of the fear of the unknown to give it a shot. "I would tell them, 'Don't pass on the opportunity,'" he added. "I would encourage anybody that gets the opportunity to come over and take part in it. ... I was extremely happy we could do it." Welch added, "Don't be shy or timid about it." Far different from their feelings just two hours earlier. Contact sports writer Nick Dettmann at ndettmann@thenewsdspatch.com or 874-7211, Ext. 447.

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.