

## Time to give a great team its due

Written by Sher Jasperse

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December 21, 2010, was a historic day in collegiate basketball – and the day’s unparalleled national story shared a meaningful link with the top Metro basketball story of the day. Did you catch it?

That night the University of Connecticut women’s basketball team pounced on Florida State to record its astonishing 89th consecutive win, eclipsing the record set by John Wooden’s UCLA teams from 1971-74. In the process, UConn’s All-American senior Maya Moore scored a career-high 41 points in yet one more spectacular performance.

ESPN previewed the game throughout the day and aired it live on national TV. You don’t have to be a fan of women’s sports to recognize that this was one of the most significant sports stories of the year.

The same evening, the third-ranked Linn-Mar girls basketball team defeated Iowa City West to notch its 39th consecutive win, tying the Mississippi Valley Conference consecutive wins record set by Cedar Rapids Washington from 1993-95. For anyone who knows about the caliber of teams in this conference, 39 is a monster number.

The intriguing tie-in between these two noteworthy events? Next year, Linn-Mar all-stater Kiah Stokes, the leading scorer and rebounder in the state, will be a Connecticut Husky, playing for the best team and arguably the best coach – Geno Auriemma – in the country. Now that was worth talking about – if you knew it was happening. On my favorite local TV station, the 10 o’clock sportscast that evening led off (for the second night in a row) with scenes of University of Iowa football players deplaning in Tempe, Ariz., as they prepared to begin workouts for the Insight Bowl – the final chapter in a decidedly underwhelming season for the heralded Hawks. (Ho hum.)

That was followed by stories about convincing wins by the unranked University of Iowa and Iowa State University men’s basketball teams over non-conference opponents. (Isn’t it Big Ten time yet?)

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Next came a preview of the Hawkeye women's basketball team's upcoming game against the UNI women – a chance to secure the state title by defeating the third of Iowa's three Division I opponents. (Did you know the Hawks had a 9-1 record and were ranked No. 16 in the nation? The only other ranked team in the state was the Iowa State women at No. 21.)

At long last – for those who were still awake – there was a nod to the most significant basketball story of the day, if not the year: the Connecticut women's record-breaking victory. And finally, for the truly devoted sports fan, there was a brief story about the Linn-Mar girls' victory to tie the Mississippi Valley Conference record.

Sure, you say, you're happy for the girls, but let's not whine about the dearth of attention paid them that night. After all, it's a major miscalculation to suggest that local sports fans are as interested in a girls basketball game as they are in even a mediocre bowl game that includes the Iowa Hawkeyes.

Maybe, but the question of whether women's sports receive less coverage because fans are less interested in them or fans are less interested because women's sports receive less coverage remains, at this point, untested – and therefore unanswered.

Nearly 40 years ago, those who questioned whether Title IX would make an impact in the athletic arena offered what many believed to be an obvious point: Girls just aren't that interested in sports. Most of those people have since recanted or disappeared, as participation in women's collegiate sports increased by more than 450 percent in the ensuing years. Among high school girls – who quickly fixed their eyes on heroes and opportunities that had never existed before – participation soared by an astounding 875 percent.

And plenty of people thought there was no room for women's sports on major TV networks. For that you can check with ESPN, which now covers the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament with as much passion and hype as CBS covers the men.

Auriemma, who navigated some choppy sports-talk waters surrounding his team's surpassing of a record set by an iconic men's team and coach, said of his superlative team, "I'm just asking

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people to admire what they do.”

Linn-Mar Coach Mike Brandt, while insisting that his team has bigger goals than setting an MVC record, might well echo his NCAA colleague. Like UConn, his squad plays an exciting team game with a powerful supporting cast for its star player.

The drama will continue Tuesday night when Stokes and her talented teammates have a chance to set the Mississippi Valley record against Waterloo West. That would indeed be something to celebrate – regardless of gender.

True sports fans admire excellence and applaud winners. To enjoy a hearty helping of both, take some time to check out the best team in the Valley.