

Peyton's tough choice helps fuel Marion

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Two games stand out for Marion's Dani Peyton as pivotal in the Indians' transformation from last season's beleaguered 6-16 team into this year's No. 15-ranked Wamac Conference contender.

The first was the second game of the season at Solon. "We went in as definite underdogs and had one of our best defensive efforts as a team," says the senior point guard. "We were down eight points at the half and came back and won it by six."

The second was Dec. 13, when the Indians rode their escalating momentum to a two-point victory over previously 3A No. 1-ranked Williamsburg, running their record to 6-0.

"I felt like we had just won the state tournament," says Peyton. "Those are two games that I'll never forget."

Needless to say, the state tournament has remained squarely in her sights as the Indians close out the month of January with an 11-6 overall record, 11-4 in the conference.

"We all knew this year was going to be a lot different," says Peyton.

"Last year we had lost seniors like Morgan Paige, we had a new coach, and we were rebuilding the team. I truly believe that what we went through last year with the tough times and the losses helped us. We knew it would be a lot of fun this year as seniors, and we don't want it to end by any means."

This year marked a turning point for Peyton in another respect as well, as she was forced to choose between her longtime team and her beloved school.

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Peyton attended tiny Cedar Valley Christian School from the fourth through 11th grades, but had played on Marion's basketball team since eighth grade. When Cedar Valley joined the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union this year, she could no longer attend one school and play at the other.

It was an occasion for much prayer and discussion at her house, says Peyton, whose ninth-grade sister Josie is also an athlete – and best friend of Cedar Valley leading scorer Shelly Hembera. Josie also attends Marion now.

In the end, says Peyton, "I wanted something new. I wanted to be a bright light for God here at Marion and get ready to go somewhere new for college next year."

She hasn't once regretted her decision, she says.

"It was a lot easier than I thought it would be because I knew quite a few people from basketball. It's definitely different going from a school with 300 kids in kindergarten through 12th grade to a school with more than that just in the high school. But the girls were great about introducing me to the teachers and other kids, and I absolutely love it here."

At the same time, she says, her affection for her old school is undiminished. "I love Cedar Valley. I still go to church there and volunteer at the school." She also hopes to catch a CVC girls basketball game once the regular season playing schedule ends.

Peyton's basketball pedigree is sound, as both her parents played basketball at Northland High School in central Iowa and her dad began teaching her to dribble when she was three. She has played with some of the top local preps since she was in grade school.

In particular, she recalls her fourth-grade AAU Panthers team that won the state tournament. Her teammates included Jasmine Royster, now at Washington, and future Kennedy star Courtney Strait, among other familiar Metro names.

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Peyton, who hopes to study criminal justice and play basketball at a four-year liberal arts college “not too far from home” next year, is determined to make the most of her final tour as a prep athlete.

“I know I won’t be playing professionally, so I’m taking every opportunity to play and be in the moment – not for me, but for my team and God and my family. I just love basketball.”

The 5-foot-5 team captain leads her squad in scoring at 12.1 points, but never focuses on that aspect of her game, she says.

“I’m trying to be the best leader I can be. To me the points don’t matter. I’m there to create and get my teammates open because we need to have everyone ready to step up. From the time I was little I worked on ballhandling and being able to dribble, and to me there’s nothing better than getting the tricky pass to your teammate for a basket.”

Second-year Marion Coach Brian O’Donnell says Peyton’s maturing as a player has paralleled the team’s growth this season.

“She’s a good shooter,” he says. “What’s made her better this year is that she’s improved in every other aspect of her game. She’s a much better defender, sees the floor better as a point guard, and she’s really understanding situational basketball. And that’s a microcosm of our entire team. We’re really starting to grasp things and improve overall.”

Peyton sets a good example for her teammates, he adds. “She represents the school very well as a student, a person and an athlete. She’s very upbeat and outgoing, and she works very hard.”

As the Indians approach the state tournament run, Peyton says the one area where she would like her team to keep growing is in “confidence in ourselves, trusting each other and not worrying about the outcome – confidence that we deserve to be where we are and we can do

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anything we work for.

“We have a big senior class and each and every one of us is going to do anything we can to keep the journey going and get as far as we can. Wherever the journey leads us, that’s where we’ll be happy.”