

They had just enough players to make a team, then these 5 girls surprised everybody

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Most Holy Trinity School JV girls basketball team members Kayla Roach, left, Olivia Torres, Nasya Davis, Julianna Izzard and Aniah Thomas at the school in Detroit on Wednesday, March 28, 2018.

(Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

From March Madness to the NBA, big-time basketball has heroes everyone knows.

But then there's small-time basketball, which almost nobody hears about, although its heroes make you want to laugh and cry at the same time. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you get to swell with wonder at the sheer improbability of seeing youngsters who refuse to lose.

Forget for a moment the stirring scenes of 6- and 7-foot giants dribbling across TV screens to stardom. Consider five girls, none very tall, at Detroit's oldest and one of its smallest schools, in historic Corktown near old Tiger Stadium: five girls in fifth and sixth grades. Just five, so they had no substitutes. That meant no one could get sick or hurt, ever, or they'd be blown out for sure.

Yet, these five, this band of sporting sisters — in kelly green jerseys, with braces, braids and ponytails — just went 8-2 for Most Holy Trinity, a parochial school of barely 140 students that doesn't even have a gym. They outshot and out-defended teams of far bigger schools and much taller players, teams loaded with subs. These girls won their league's second-place trophy.

Then they got into the championship game of the Catholic Youth Organization's postseason tournament, where they lost to Dearborn Divine Child, a perennial power that suited up 14 players — nearly three times more than they had. To win against these odds, and girls often considerably taller, this quintet played again and again like all champs must play — better than they should.

And how did it feel? Surprise: The best thing wasn't the pride in winning. They felt that, of course. But the best thing, when the season was all over? "Friendship," 10-year-old Olivia Torres said, simply.

"They really came together as a team," their coach said. And how could they not? — with all five playing every minute, every game, or else.

Somehow, the wins kept coming. That brought fresh excitement to sports at their school — which actually dates its founding to 1838, one year after Michigan gained statehood — just when an anonymous donor stands ready to fund the school's first gym. If all goes well, construction could start this year on a \$2-million addition, to include a basketball court but also a community center open to all in the neighborhood, leaders said. Most Holy Trinity is a Catholic preschool, elementary and middle school that prides itself on religious as well as racial diversity.

"We're a Catholic school, but we have Baptists, we have Lutherans, we have Seventh Day Adventists — and we all go and pray together, every day," admissions director Carla Devlin said.



Most Holy Trinity School JV girls basketball team members Julianna Izzard, left, Nasya Davis, Aniah Thomas, Kayla Roach and Olivia Torres with the 2018 St. Margaret Post Season fifth/sixth grade girls runner-up trophy at their school in Detroit on Wednesday, March 28, 2018.

And there's a third kind of diversity here, a kind that's rare in most schools. It's the kind that forms a streaking basketball team with five schoolgirls from very different economic circumstances. One girl's father is a groundskeeper; another is a top official in city government. Yet, those differences got squashed on this team where there was no use vying for a coach's favor, no point in cozying up to gain playing time or kudos. Instead, every girl played start to finish, bonding them like Super Glue, they said.

"I got to grow close with my teammates," said Aniah Thomas, 10, reflecting on her Cinderella season, then added: "And I got really better at basketball."

She and her teammates beat the odds in a neighborhood that's doing the same. At a time when Detroit's renaissance abruptly flipped the script on the once down-and-out Corktown area — scattering it with new restaurants and lofts, as well as the new high-tech site of Ford's driverless-car designers, and even talk lately of the carmaker taking over the vacant Michigan Central train station — a big-time season for this small-time squad seems like one more unlikely notch in the area's rapid ratchet upward.

At Most Holy Trinity, with its emphasis on morals training, the girls heard often from coaches why it was often better to give than to receive.

"We just pass the ball," said Nasya Davis, 12, a sixth-grader who played center, and who explained: "Most teams have trouble with that — they're ball hogs." Amen to that, as any fan of youth sports can testify.

They did whatever it took to play through injuries, play through feeling ill or tired, play through the exhaustion of running nonstop against opposition players, fresh from rests on the bench.

"I would wish sometimes that we had subs, but toward the end of the year I just got used to it — no breaks," said 11-year-old Julianna Izzard, a sixth-grader.

One found an edge at her personal training table.

"The first time I made a shot, I had bacon biscuits and pizza" before the game, said Kayla Roach, 11, another sixth-grader. From then on, Kayla ate that before every game, her teammates chimed in to say. All live in Detroit and all are on Most Holy Trinity's honor roll.

Not many people know about the girls' pint-sized heroics against Catholic Youth Organization's dream teams from Dearborn, Northville and Novi. Well, except for parents, teachers and the other teams. But that may change on Friday when the girls will see the Pistons play on a special night. They'll be recognized before the game at center court. For those precious moments, small-time will stand with big-time.



Most Holy Trinity School JV girls basketball team member Olivia Torres, right, talks about her nickname "Invisible Muscles" as teammate Aniah Thomas watches at their school in Detroit on Wednesday.



Most Holy Trinity School in Detroit is seen on Wednesday, March 28, 2018. An anonymous donor gave funds for a new \$2 million sports facility and community space that will start construction in the summer of 2018.

"We're pleased to recognize the accomplishments of the JV girls basketball team at Most Holy Trinity School and salute five impressive young ladies on the desire and the commitment they displayed throughout their season," said Pistons spokesman Kevin Grigg.

Practices required sleight of mind: dribbling and passing around imaginary opponents, said the team's 81-year-old volunteer coach, a veteran of Catholic school sports.

"I could not practice them against a defense, because we had no other players, so we had to do a lot of phantom practicing," said Coach Stanley Wegrzynowicz of St. Clair Shores. (His name is really not so hard -- say *ZEG-zenn-OH-vich* -- although the girls call him Coach Stan.)

Because Most Holy Trinity lacks a gym, parents

drove the team each day to a church gym, 3 miles away, in southwest Detroit, rented for \$35 an hour, said athletic director Vic Venegas. Essential to their success, everybody said, was Aniah's father, Roderick Thomas — on hand for every practice and game in the role of assistant coach. Thomas flashed a wide grin when he recalled the season.

"Defensively, nobody matched our girls. They had no fear. People heard how they were playing, and they started packing the stands," he said. Parents took to calling them "the Fantastic Five," after the superhero team of Marvel Comics. Opposing teams and their coaches began acknowledging their amazing play — and, almost more than the victories, noting their sheer endurance to play nonstop through four six-minute quarters.

When it was all over, they'd earned a towering trophy. And while an anonymous donor was already planning to underwrite a new gymnasium, the girls' amazing season did nothing but reinforce his resolve and everyone else's to see Most Holy Trinity expand, church pastor Msgr. Chuck Kosanke said.

To make the new gym happen, the parish purchased land adjoining the school from the City of Detroit, said Kosanke, the man everybody calls "Father Chuck."

"We got the deed on March 2. At this point, we have to get the plans approved by the city, and we hope to start construction this summer," he said.

As hard as it is to explain a season like the girls had, one parent had a ready answer.

"They just persevered," said Trunetta Roach, Kayla's mom. Before games, her mother said, Kayla often would whine a little.

"She'd say, 'I'm too short — the other players are huge,' " her mother recalled.

"I'd say, 'Just get out there.' And she would. And they'd win."

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