



Photo by Andy Ratchman

Lourdes assistant coach Ben Huizenga is shown with sons Jack (left) and Benny.

Lourdes basketball family shares struggles, success

By Brad Hartmann
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For every father, bonding with their children should be priority No. 1. Getting the opportunity to coach and watch them develop into good people is extra special.

For the past 20 years Ben Huizenga has been one of the faces of the Oshkosh Lourdes Academy boys basketball program as an assistant coach while helping guide the Knights to four state appearances. This was a year he will never forget after coaching both of his sons while advancing to the WIAA D4 state championship game before a close loss to New Glarus.

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"I have a bond with both kids. Being a coach and a dad is not always easy. You never want to risk messing up the dad portion because of basketball," Huizenga said. "It's not necessarily for everyone but in the end it was worth it, and I think Benny, Jack and I are closer because of it."

"I never really thought we had to win a gold ball to make this season (26-2) special."

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In an 81-47 victory Dec. 29 over Ripon, Benny reinjured his right knee patella that was damaged in his junior year and took two months to recover.

"I tried to contest a step-back on defense and all of a sudden it felt like someone stabbed me in the knee. I couldn't walk on it and I thought some cartilage popped out," Benny said. "We were playing Laconia the first game of the year and Jack McKellips threw me a pass and it was a little over my head. I went to try to save it and I twisted and felt a really loud pop in my knee."

Both Benny and his younger brother Jack suffered the same injury weeks apart in the 2017-2018 season.

"Benny actually dislocated the patella. It just popped out of place and by doing that it will either tear a ligament or it can break it," said Dr. Paul Fagan, who treated both boys. "He actually broke a small piece off the patella. Jack actually tore the ligament of the patella. It was probably better that he broke the bone. It's more predictable that bone is going to heal to bone as opposed to a ligament tear."

"Could this be a genetic occurrence? Yeah it's likely. In the adolescent population about 29 out of every 100,000 kids this will happen to so it's not super common."

Fagan describes both Huizenga brothers as tough, calm and with a maturity level you usually don't see in teenagers.

"I really commend the both of them. They are very motivated," Fagan said. "They excel both inside the classroom and in athletics. I think that's a testament to their parents and family values."

The three words that any young student athlete dreads hearing — season-ending surgery — was not in the vocabulary for Benny. Green Bay Packers team Dr. Patrick McKenzie suggested that option but Fagan believed that by rehab the bones would come together again.

"Doctor McKenzie gave me good advice, but at the same time I wanted to play again and you have to take that risk," Benny said. "It was difficult every day not knowing if you will ever play again or



Photo by Andy Ratchman

Benny Huizenga came back from a knee injury late in the season to spark the Knights into the WIAA championship.

when you are going to make your comeback. You have to stay persistent and try your best."

On Jan. 23 Benny had his knee scoped and it was off to rehab with physical therapist Ben Benesh, who had him ready to go five weeks later against Saint Mary Catholic in the opening round of the playoffs.

"I was nervous as heck the entire time watching him. He did great. He scored 13 points in the state championship game," Benesh said. "It was fantastic to see his success story. This is the kind of stuff that you would hope would happen to kid like Benny."

Basketball has played an influential role for the family as Ben grew up on a farm in Randolph and started playing in third grade and continued into high school at Central Wisconsin Christian. He was a two-sport athlete in track and basketball as he helped capture the D3 WISAA state championship in 1993 as a junior.

Ben and Benny both experienced runner-up finishes in their senior year in state championship games. Jack is next in line to meet that challenge.

"On the court we have that different type of bond where we are friends and family. It's so special words can't explain it," Jack said. "It's an awesome feeling having both of them with me this year. It was an awesome feeling playing with him. I will never forget sharing the hug in the locker room after the sectional finals."

Two main ingredients to be a successful coach are a passion for the players and the game. Twenty years ago former Lourdes coach Dennis Ruedinger surprised Ben by asking him to be his assistant.

"No question that this was one of my best coaching decisions. Ben has been a phenomenal high school basketball coach," Ruedinger said. "I think the greatest trait of a coach more so than the X's and O's is helping develop kids' character. Ben has that quality to mentor and develop young kids through the game of basketball."

When Ruedinger ended his coaching time the Knights hired Brad Clark from Ripon College, who after meeting with Ben knew he had one of the most loyal assistants he could ask for.

"He is passionate. He has a passion for Lourdes Academy and the kids. He is the type that will always have your back when things are going bad," said Clark, who announced last week he is stepping down as head coach. "He told me when I got the job four years ago, 'I got your back 100 percent of the time.' And having an assistant that says that and does that is a good one because now these days you need to have thick skin."

In Benny's absence on the court he cheered on his teammates and offered his perspective on things other teammates couldn't see.

"Benny always said he never wanted others to see himself get down on himself with the injury and I think he did a great job on that," teammate Henry Noone said. "I think if we would have seen him down we might have followed and wouldn't have the successful season that we did. He is a class act."

Benny has had many basketball highlights but many of his teammates remember a game against Ripon in seventh grade, down by 15. After cutting the deficit to two with four seconds left, Huizenga hit a game-winning three at the buzzer.

One game Benny recalls is the time he spent playing two-on-one pickup games against Jack and best friend Preston Ruedinger while growing up.

"Usually it was Jack and I versus Benny," Ruedinger said. "Most of the time we didn't win or if we did win Benny would get mad, but we all loved each other and we knew that one day we would be on the court together and it turned out pretty cool."

In Benny's four years at Lourdes he was named second-team all-conference (Trailways-North) and this year was all-conference honorable mention (Trailways-East).

"They are all special. This one means more especially coming back from an injury," Benny said. "It showed because they knew what kind of player I was before the injury."

Next year he will be attending the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse majoring in biomedical sciences while Jack enjoys his junior year at Lourdes.

Benny doesn't have a nickname like some of his teammates, but one that would suit him well would be Comeback Kid.

"For all my years of coaching, the way Benny handled the adversity through his injuries and how he stuck together with the team motivated and staying positive is one of the most incredible things I have seen during my life as a coach," Ruedinger said. "And that's what Lourdes basketball is all about."



In memory of my son

Steven Singstock

