

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Great Coaching Doesn't End at Buzzer

By IVY ASHE

Lisa Knight played only one year of field hockey in high school.

For those familiar with the field hockey program at Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, the statement might seem so ludicrous as to require a punch line afterwards — surely, you can't be serious.



photo by Ivy Ashe

Field hockey coach Lisa Knight gathers the troops.

“I was mostly a basketball player,” Ms. Knight explained in an interview. “That was really the sport I was passionate about.”

Passionate about a sport other than field hockey?

Looking around Ms. Knight's office just off the high school gymnasium, it's impossible to imagine. There's virtually no wall space to be seen; it's

all taken up by photos, handmade posters and birthday cards from former players, and schedules from previous seasons. Framed team pictures line the desk. A couple of field hockey sticks lean against a spare chair.

With close to 25 years of coaching at the regional high school under her belt (“I'm not quite there yet,” Ms. Knight said), there's been plenty of time to fill the space.

She began as a volunteer coach for the junior varsity team, a position she held for nine years before moving to the varsity program in 1999 with co-coach Anne Lemenager. The team won the Cape and Islands league championship that season, advancing to the South Section semifinals. Ms. Knight and Mrs. Lemenager were named



photo by Ivy Ashe

co-coaches of the year by the Cape Cod Times.

Pictures by Lisa Knight: "I'm up all night figuring out what I'm going to do the next day."

In 2000, Ms. Knight took on head coaching duties. In her first solo season, the team again took the league championship and moved on to sectionals — but this time, they advanced all the way to the state finals, a first for the program.

The road to states was, as all good sports dramas are, a nail-biter — perhaps more so than the state finals themselves, which the team lost 2-0. But in the state semi-final game, the girls and their 17-5-2 record took on undefeated Lynnfield in a match that involved one regulation game, one overtime 11-11 game, and one 7-7 game before moving into penalty strokes to decide the winner.

The Vineyard emerged victorious on a shot by junior Natasha Snowden.

"I just stood there for . . . what seemed forever for me going, 'Oh my gosh, we're going to the state championships,'" she recalled. "And I had goose bumps all over me and just ran down to the team.

"I mean, it would have been nice to have a state championship and a ring on my finger, but that's just an incredible moment right there."

Her career has been filled with moments. Four years after reaching states in 2000, she was awarded the Massachusetts Women in Athletics Distinguished Service Award. She's guided countless girls, including a younger sister and a niece, into college field hockey programs, and made the team a regular in the state tournament.

But the 2011 season has been a bit different. The team is younger than usual — 23 seniors have graduated in the past two years — and "kind of got kicked around," in Ms. Knight's words, after some early-season victories.

"It's a challenging season for me," she admitted. "But I love it . . . everybody thinks that I go home — and this is true for any coach — go home and forget about it and move on to the TV or move on to making dinner. You don't.

"I'm up all night figuring out what I'm going to do the next day . . . I doodle all the time [about] who's going to play what and what corner's going to work for this player."

She pulled a box from beneath her desk. Inside were the cardboard pieces of a huge 60-piece puzzle, each one painted purple and containing the names of somebody — varsity players, junior varsity players, coaches — on the squad; Ms. Knight had spent the weekend making it. The girls put the puzzle together in the previous day's practice as part of a team-building exercise.

"[Coaching] is a full-time thought process," said Ms. Knight. "And I wouldn't

have it any other way.”

And ensuring that the team is a team both on and off the field is Ms. Knight's main priority. New players are given Big Sisters at the start of each preseason (“By the time . . . the freshmen get to school, they've already got friends”). Field hockey in-jokes abound; postpractice field trips to get ice cream are not infrequent. Last year's team insisted on adding an extra word to their team jackets — hidden beneath the hood of the jacket is the word Family.

“They know that they're a part of something,” said Ms. Knight. “I don't care what kids become a part of — it could be drama, it could be soccer . . . I just think it really, really makes a difference when you're part of a program and part of a team,” she added.

“High school's a really hard time for girls,” said Nina Butler, a former player (class of 2007) and one of the junior varsity coaches, “and [Lisa] just makes you feel like you belong to something bigger than this high school.”

In terms of reflecting the Martha's Vineyard field hockey program as a whole, then, this season is perhaps the most successful of Ms. Knight's career. Three former players, Niki Alexander, Nina Butler, and Beth Blankenship-O'Connor make up the rest of the coaching staff. Ms. Blankenship-O'Connor, the goalie coach, returns to the team after a few years away, but for Ms. Butler and Ms. Alexander, who graduated last spring, it's their first time on the other side of the field.

“I wouldn't be out here if it wasn't for Lisa,” said Ms. Butler. “If it was just some other lady I would never donate all my time . . . but it's Lisa, and it's a true testament to her legacy. We wouldn't do it if we didn't love her and we didn't believe in the program and believe in the kids.

“I was only going to [coach] for a couple of weeks,” she said. “But now I'm here the whole season.”

Ms. Knight had her own words of praise. “[At JV games], I sit back in the chair — which is very unusual for me — and watch them coach, and I'm like wow, she yells just like me, or, oh my God, she falls on the ground just like me. So something's right.”

Concluded Ms. Alexander: “I get a little rowdy on the sidelines. But I guess I just learned from the best.”

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