

WINNING BATTLES OFF THE COURT

Varsity Team Scores Points By Sticking To Healthy Diets

BY TERRY POPE

It may take a bowl of Wheaties to prepare Michael Jordan for a tough game. But for the West Brunswick High School varsity basketball team, all it takes is a meal low in fats to prepare for the next opponent.

Before each home game, West Coach Billy Mims takes his team to a Shallotte restaurant where he and his players engage an invisible foe. This war isn't against the Cougars, Scorpions or Wildcats, but against high cholesterol levels and hypertension, or high blood pressure.

The 1992 Trojan basketball players are committed to improving their diets and performance on the court this season by eating healthier foods.

It is the third year for the team meals program, which is sponsored by a group of Shallotte area businesses. The idea was initiated by local businessman John Kinlaw, and from there a group got together to chip in and pay for the meals, said Mims.

Dining together also helps to build camaraderie among teammates, but this year the menu includes lessons on which foods to eat and which to avoid, said Mims, who is waging a personal battle of his own against hypertension.

"This is the first time we've really placed an emphasis on low-fat foods," said Mims. "The sponsors have been there from day one, but now we're just expanding on it a little."

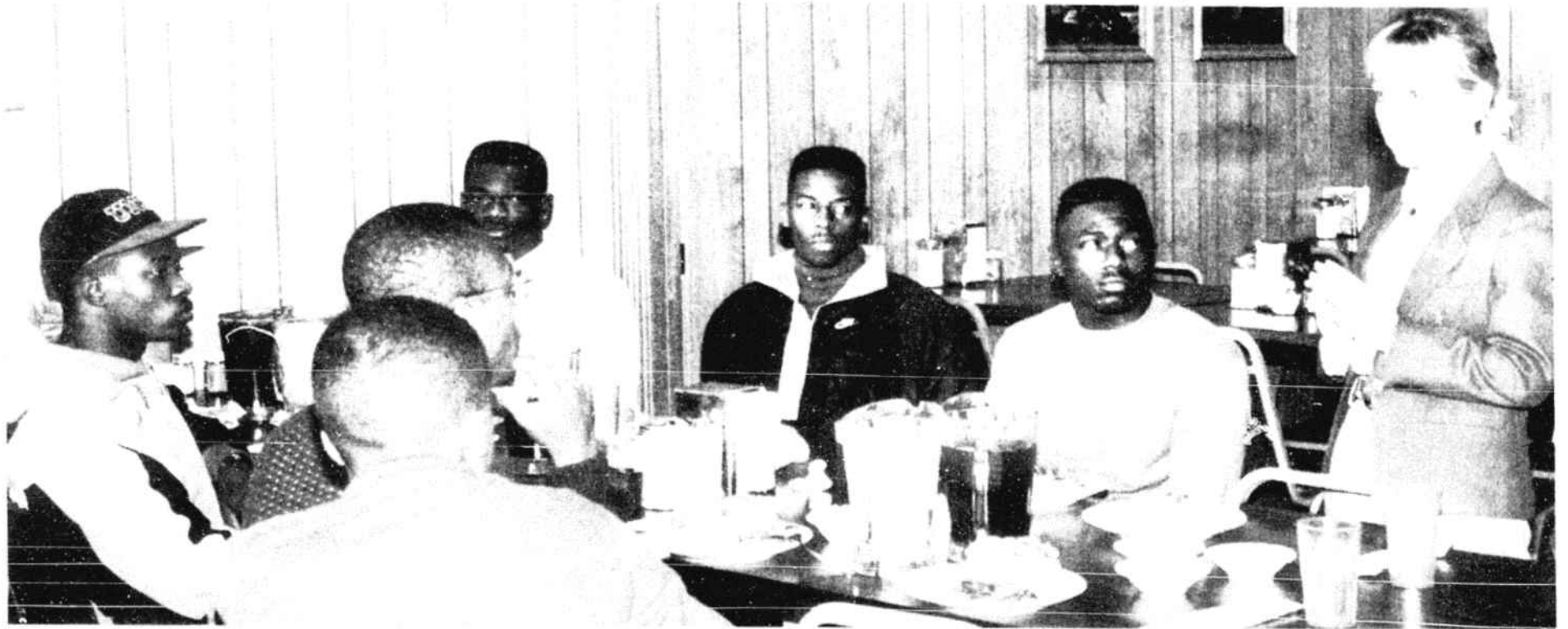
The new focus on healthy lifestyles also produces players who serve as positive role models both in athletic competition and among their teen-aged peers, said Mims. The goal of any coach, he says, is to produce winners off the court as well as on the court.

Often, players are congratulated for hitting a winning shot, for beating a cross-county rival or for breaking an individual scoring record. But when the shots don't fall and the glory fades, a coach must be more than a strategist. He must offer praise to his players who perform well in life.

"That's why I like the idea of doing something good all the time," said Mims.

When Public Health Educator Rita Hatcher of the Brunswick County Health Department heard about the team meals program, she offered advice on what foods would be best for the athletes. She has worked with the cooks to plan meals that help the athletes perform.

"Don't let my size intimidate you," Ms. Hatcher told the players at a recent luncheon. After a round of laughter, the players sat wide-eyed as she explained her victories in powerlifting.



PUBLIC HEALTH Educator Rita Hatcher explains good eating habits with West Brunswick basketball players (clockwise from left) Anthony Moody, Lonnie Mitchell, Steve Holmes, Adam Johnson, Shawn Bowens and Jimmy Grissett.

Weighing just 92 pounds, Ms. Hatcher won first place in the 1989 USA Olympic Powerlifting Competition in Dallas, Texas, an event televised nationally by ESPN. Her training for that event made her more aware of why athletes need to eat the right foods. Her coach stressed proper diet as well as practice, practice, practice.

"A good coach, with your best interests at heart, will know about good nutrition," she said.

A recent dinner for the basketball team consisted of grilled chicken breast prepared with a touch of soy sauce, stir-fried vegetables, a baked potato and sliced peaches. Several hours later, the team won its game against Wallace-Rose Hill.

Senior Jimmy Grissett said his favorite healthy meal is turkey breast with rice, broccoli and fruit. The cooks rarely prepare fried foods, said Shirley Bordeaux, who coordinates her restaurant's menu and schedule to accommodate the team.



SHAWN STEVENSON enjoys a dinner of turkey breast, broccoli and fruit—a meal low in fats.

"It's very hard to get them to eat any kind of vegetables," said Ms. Bordeaux. "He (Mims) doesn't fuss at them if they don't eat it all. He lets them eat what they feel comfortable with, which is good."

Physical conditioning helps teens avoid the risk of hypertension. But some athletes have died of angina attacks while exercising or competing in sports, said Ms.

Hatcher. Doctors have linked some sudden deaths in athletes to poor nutrition.

The comment brought back haunting memories for several players and Mims, who recalled the tragic death of a former South Brunswick High School athlete last year. Sakou Spaulding died of cardiac arrest during a pickup basketball game. He had played on South Coach Gene Doane's 1989 squad.

Although no medical link was made between Spaulding's eating habits and his tragic death, Mims said he uses the example to make a point with his players that eating right is one of the things an athlete can do to help avoid tragedy.

"That has happened," he said. "You read of it happening everyday."

On the court a person's speed can also be aided by what they eat, said Ms. Hatcher.

"When you eat foods high in fat, not only does it slow you down in speed," she said, "but it slows you down mentally."

While in high school, Mims said he was often advised to eat candy bars before events. Also, team dinners included heavy meals, steak and hamburgers or other foods high in fats, he said. The candy bar treatment offers what Ms. Hatcher calls a "fake energy source".

"It's an old wives' tale," she said. "Fruits high in natural sugar work best. It stays with you and gives you that energy that you need."

In addition to better performance on the court, better eating habits also help to fight high blood pressure. Excessive intake of salt and a lack of exercise are allies of the disease that affects one out of every four Americans and one of every three blacks.

"One of the best things you can do is to eat healthy foods," she said. "The other best thing is to practice. But this is the first step. It's step number one."

Mims added, "And we're slowly getting there."

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