



New Mexico Activities Association Student Spotlight

Big Game, Big Heart, Big Team Player

By Jeff Jackson

If defense does win championships, as the old cliché claims, then Johnny Worrall is definitely on the right path, although his offense is equally impressive.

Worrall, one of the leading offensive players in the state of New Mexico for boys' basketball, is all about defense in this, his senior season at Gateway Christian High School in Roswell. He tops several offensive categories in Class 2A and ranks near first among players from all six conferences. He recorded 22 double-doubles this season and held sizable leads in almost every category.

But, he played his best when his team didn't have the ball, Worrall said, because he took most pride in stopping the other team from scoring.

Despite holding a scoring average of 19.8 points per game this season, which ranked ninth in New Mexico overall and second in Class 2A, Worrall mentioned his rebounding and defensive footwork being his best skillset and favorite aspects of the game.

"Rebounding and footwork. Footwork can be hard for a big guy and defensively shutting down the lane and being a big force on defense," he said.

While his rebounding average of 17.3 per game, which was second in the state in all conferences, bears out his prowess on the boards at 6 feet, 8 inches and 205 pounds, Worrall was also a threat in blocking shots with his 2A-leading average of 5.2 per game. To complement his shot-blocking, Worrall also is adept at forcing turnovers, as his 2.7 steals per game average showed.

The penchant for defense, however, could work against him if the opponent was smart and cagey, Worrall realizes.

"I just have to use my head. I'm almost always the tallest guy on the court, so a lot of teams try to get me to foul out. So I just have to use my head and be smart," Worrall said.

Being one of the leading players in New Mexico also had its benefits for Worrall, who added that basketball is still a team game and the team's winning percentage is the most important statistic.

"It's good [to see the statistics]. It's been a blast. It's fun to see that, but the team's success is most important. I just want to play my best every game."

Winning the Warriors did. Gateway Christian finished first in District 4-AA standings with a 20-6 overall record and a perfect 6-0 in district. The Warriors' made the 2016 U.S. Bank State Basketball Championships as a No. 5 seed, beating Jemez Valley and Escalante, before falling in the semifinals to Melrose.

Worrall was a team leader through his effort in practice and dedication, said his coach and father, John Worrall, who



credits Gateway Christian's other players, in addition to his son, for the Warriors' success this season.

"It's not just Johnny. We have six other seniors on the team, but Johnny is having a particularly good year," Coach Worrall said. "It's a challenge. I try to treat them all the same, of course, but he makes it easy because Johnny works as hard as anybody out there. Johnny has always played with fire and intensity and has been a good team player, so there have not been any problems."

The Warriors under Worrall's guidance were much like a family in that Coach Worrall, Johnny and several other players had been a unit for many years.

"Basketball is a passion for me, not a job," Coach Worrall stated. "We have just tried to get the kids to love the game. It has been a privilege that Gateway Christian School has allowed me to coach, not just Johnny but all the kids. Scooby Taylor, Cort Marsley, Timmy Schultz, Nate Paredes and Johnny have played together since sixth grade and each one knows where each other will be on the court. That, and the fact they are great kids, makes it a lot of fun."

The Worralls' camaraderie of player-son with coach-dad was a special one for both sides, they said.

"It's been interesting," said Coach Worrall, who previously coached three basketball-playing daughters at Gateway Christian, starting in 2005. "There's never been a problem, but when I see him out there I feel a lot of pride."

They also just hang out, but usually in the gym, the way gym rats do.

"It's great," Johnny said. "For instance, [Tuesday] night we were shooting in the gym until 9:30 or 10 at night. We're very close during the basketball season for sure."

Coach Worrall will leave the bench after this season and timed his coaching life purposely to coincide with Johnny's graduation from Gateway Christian after more than 10 years of coaching his children. He's excited to help Johnny in the next stage of school and basketball at Washington University in St. Louis this autumn.

"I'm so excited. It's going to be great to be part of that program there," Johnny stated.