

Damian, Thanks For The Memories.....

Written by Mike Kelly

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He has a boyish look. He speaks softly, and he has the mannerisms of a gentleman.

But get him on a basketball court, and Watauga High senior Damian Edwards turns into a dynamo. Edwards, a three-year varsity starter and one of the greatest players ever to wear a WHS uniform, was rewarded for his efforts by being named the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference Player of the Year.

It's the first time a Pioneer has won this award since Eafon Hill did it in 2000. Jake Orr was the last men's player to be named Player of the Year way back in 1998.

"It was a honor, for sure," Edwards said. "When (assistant coach) Jerry Moretz told me and congratulated me, I was shocked. There's a lot of great players in this league."

But it was a bitter-sweet finish for Edwards, who averaged 19 points-a-game and set a new single-season record for steals with 94. He was suspended for what turned out to be the last three games at the end of the season for picking up three technical fouls in a loss at St. Stephens in the regular-season finale on February 11.

"I really wanted to play in that (playoff) game against (Charlotte) Vance," Edwards said. "Those guys are my brothers out there. I wanted so much to be out there and be a part of them. It was real hard sitting through that game."

And his disappointment was extremely painful. After all he and his teammates racked up 48 wins the last three years. They also led the Pioneers to three state playoff appearances and to their first sectional final in three decades.

"We were never cocky, but we were very confident in ourselves," he said. "Yes, we had a chip on our shoulder because the Charlotte schools looked at us like a bunch of mountain boys that weren't very athletic. But we had the ability and the talent to play with anybody."

The Pioneers showed off those talents on February 8 by knocking off Hickory, the regular-season champions, in Boone on Senior Night. The Pioneers simply outplayed the Red Tornadoes, who had dominated them in their three previous meetings. The win snapped Hickory's 21-game winning streak in league play, and it was also the first time the Pioneers had beaten Hickory since 1993.

"That game is the most memorable moment in my career," Edwards said. "We were so determined to win that game. They handled us pretty well the first time we played them. But we changed our offense, and moved the ball around. It really worked in our favor."

Edwards turned in two stellar performances against the Red Tornadoes, which included a 35-point effort at Kraft Gymnasium in January. But those two games only scratch the surface, when it comes to his brilliant career.

There was the 38-point effort last year at the old Lentz-Eggers Gym, his magical touch from the three-point line, his ability of finding ways to score from anywhere on the floor, the level of consistency he brought each time out, and his strong desire to play defense.

"I take it personal when someone scores on me," he said. "Defense is work, and I tried to do something on both ends of the floor to help my team. I've always wanted to play the perfect game. It's basically impossible to do, but I was just trying to find ways to help my team win."

And Edwards wears his emotions on his sleeve. He takes a lot of pride in his performance. And he hopes to carry that attitude to the next level. He has a strong desire to play college

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basketball. Montreat College, an NAIA school in Montreat, NC, and Central Connecticut State, a Division I school in New Britain, CT, and a member of the Northeast Conference, are his top choices right now.

"I would really like to play at Central Connecticut," said Edwards, who is originally from Manchester, CT. "I went to a camp up there last year, and I have gone to see them play a couple of times. I really feel I could fit into their system.

"Plus, I grew up in that area, and I still have family up there. I never dreamed I would be playing at Watauga. But my mom wanted to earn her masters degree, and she chose to do it at Appalachian (State University). That's what brought me to Boone."

And what a blessing that turned out to be for the Pioneers.