

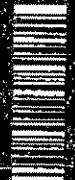
Los Angeles  
The 24-Candidate Race  
BY JANE FRIESEN

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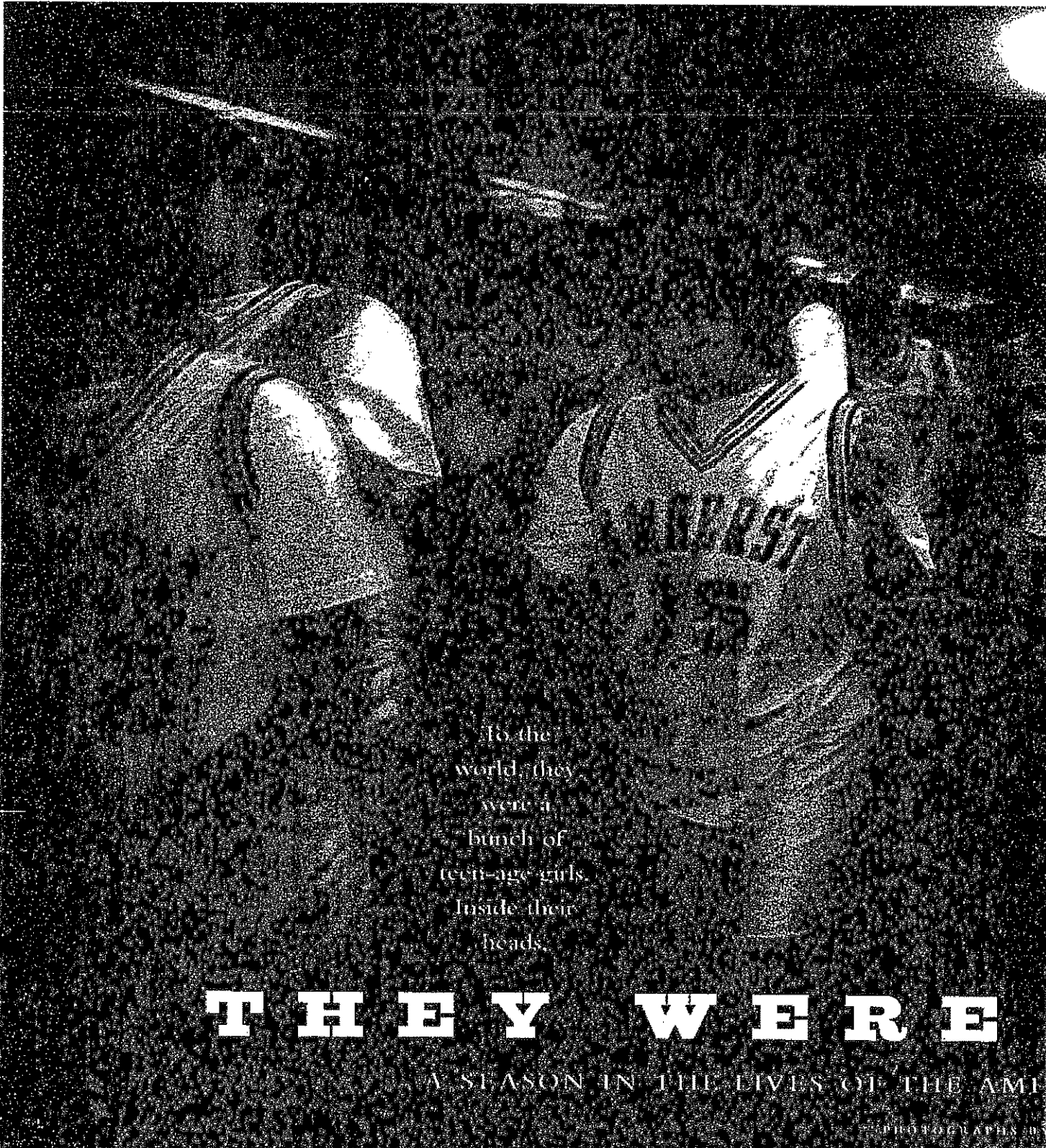


This team is just one team in one season. It alone cannot change the discrimination against girls and their bodies throughout history. But here



## In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle

A SEASON IN THE LIVES OF THE AMHERST HURRICANES By Madeleine H. Blais



To the  
world, they  
were a  
bunch of  
teen-age girls.  
Inside their  
heads.

# THEY WERE

A SEASON IN THE LIVES OF THE AME

PHOTOGRAPHS BY



# COMMANDOS

FIRST HURRICANES **By Madeleine H. Blais**

UNION SQUARE

PRECEDING PAGE:

Primed to attack, Jade Sharpe (No. 12), Patri Abad (15) and Rita Powell (55) leading the Hurricanes into their final home game, a 56-34 playoff victory over Langmeadow. The Amherst girls would go on to face their archrivals, the Northampton Blue Devils.



RIGHT: Jen Pariseau, called Cloudy by her teammates because of the high arch of her three-pointers and foul shots, hit 4 for 6 from the foul line when the Hurricanes beat the Blue Devils, 63-41, in the Western Mass Regional finals.



ABOVE: From left, Carrie Thorp, Jessi Denis, Kim Warner, Patri Abad, Kathleen Poe and Jade Sharpe listening to Coach Ron Moyer charge them up before the Langmeadow game.

TOP CENTER: Coach explaining the finer points of his field defense to Lucia Maranis (No. 32), Sophie King and Jade Sharpe.

**T**HE VOICE OF THE COACH rises above the din of shuffling footsteps, loud greetings, the slamming of metal, the thud of books. "Listen up. I want you to check right now. Do you have your uniforms? Your shoes and your socks? Do you have any other items of clothing that might be needed?"

Coach Ron Moyer believes it's possible to pack abstractions along with one's gear, intangibles like "intensity" and "game face" and "consistency" and "defense." As the members of the Amherst Regional High School girls' basketball team

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prepare to board the Hoop Phi Express on their way to the Centrum in Worcester more than an hour away for the Massachusetts state championship, he tells them, "Today, I want you to pack your courage."

The team is 23-1 going into this game, losing only to Agawam, which, like the Haverhill team they are facing this evening, has some real height. Haverhill, known for aggressive ball, nothing dirty but just short of it, has two girls over six feet nicknamed Twin Towers. Moyer has prepped his team with a couple of specialized plays, the Murphy and the Skoolace, and he tells them: "Expect to play a little football." Amherst girls have a reputation for being afraid to throw their elbows, but this year they have learned to take the words "finesse team" as an insult. Although Coach has been careful to avoid saying "state championship" to goad his team, last fall he did tell one aging gym rat in town: "I have the two best guards in the state and probably the nation, but it all depends on the girls up front. There's an old saying — 'Guards win games, but forwards win championships.' We'll have to see."

At 6 foot 6, Moyer looms over his

players. With a thick cap of graying brown hair and bangs that flop down over his forehead, he resembles a grizzly bear on spindly legs. The girls are more like colts. For Moyer, turning them into a team has nothing to do with breaking their spirit and everything to do with harnessing it.

As Jen Pariseau listens to Coach before leaving for Worcester, her legs can't stop twitching. One of the six seniors on the team playing high-school hoop together for the last time, she has thick, dark eyebrows and long, lanky limbs. For her, tonight's game is the perfect revenge, not just against Haverhill but also against some of the rebuffs she suffered as an athlete on the way up. For three years, she played on one of Amherst's Little League teams, the Red Sox. She was pitcher, shortstop and first baseman. When it was time to choose the all-star league, she was told her bunts were not up to par.

Jen's teammates are just as hyped up. Half of them are giving the other half piggybacks. There are lots of hand-slapping and nudges. They swirl around one another, everyone making a private point of touching Jamilla Wideman, Jen's co-captain, as if one



ABOVE: Jamila Wideman (No. 11), the Predator, successfully directing the charge against the dreaded Northampton Blue Devils.

dark-haired, brown-eyed girl could transmit the power of her playing to all the others. Jamila is an all-America, recipient of more than 150 offers of athletic scholarships. On the court, the strong bones on her face are like a flag demanding to be heeded; she is a study in quickness and confidence, the ball becoming part of her body. Her nickname is Predator.

Jen Pariseau is two-time all-Western Mass. and together the two guards delighted fans all season with the way they delivered the ball to each other, sometimes in a dippy doo behind the back or between the legs, often in an open shot. Jenny and Jamila, in Amherst, it's one word.

Coach pauses. He looks as though he is about to rebuke the girls for all the squirming, but he shrugs and gives a big smile. "Let's go." Then, perhaps more to himself than to them: "While we're still young."

SHORTLY AFTER 5 IN THE evening, the sky is thick and gray and hooded, the cloud cover a welcome hedge against what has been a bitter New England winter. The bus the girls board is different from the usual.

"Hooked up and smooth," says Jen

BELOW: In Amherst, they are known as Jenny and Jamila, one word, co-captains of the Hurricanes. Jamila Wideman, top, during a contemplative

moment in her bedroom. She plans to pursue law and African-American studies at Stanford. Jen Pariseau, bottom, calls the wall above her bed the "strong

women wall" because it is covered with pictures of her favorite role models. She is planning to play ball for Dartmouth and to major in engineering.



Pariseau, admiring the special features, including upholstered seats, a toilet, four television sets and a VCR mounted on the ceiling — a definite step up from the yellow tin cans they have taken to every other game. There are some cheerleaders on the bus as well as Tricia Lea, an assistant coach with her own high-school memories about what it was like to go up against those Hillies from Haverhill in their brown and yellow uniforms with the short shorts. "Haverhill. I don't know what they eat up there, but they can be slightly ruthless. Sportsmanship does not run very deep in that town."

A few years back, Coach had trouble convincing players and their families of the seriousness of the commitment to girls' basketball. Jenny and

Jamila remember playing in varsity games five and six years ago when the gym would be empty of spectators except for their parents and maybe a few lost souls who had missed the late bus. Coach remembers girls who would cut practice to go to their boy-friends' games, and once during the playoffs, a team captain left to go on a school-sponsored cultural exchange for three weeks in the former Soviet Union. As far as he's concerned, the current policy could not be clearer: You want cultural exchange? You can have it with Hamp.

Tonight, Amherst is sending three "pep" buses to the game, unprecedented support for an athletic event, boys' or girls'. Amherst is a place that tends to prize thought over action, to favor toughness. It prefers to hon-

or the work of the individual dedicated to a life of monastic scholarship rather than some noisy group effort. But this season, there were sellout crowds. There was even that ultimate badge: a wary cop on the premises for the first time in the history of a girls' event.

Amherst is a college town, with the usual benign ineffectuality that makes most college towns as maddening as they are charming and livable. When the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a contest for town motto, Moyer submitted one that he still thinks should have won — "Amherst: Where sexuality is an option and reality is an alternative."

Amherst is, for the most part, smoke free, nuclear free and eager to free Tibet. Ponchos with little projectiles of fleece have never gone out of style. Banners stretch across South Pleasant Street at the town common, including the vintage "Spay or Neuter Your Pet, Prevent Abandonment & Suffering." This is a town that saves spotted salamanders, creating love tunnels (at taxpayers' eager expense) so that they can all descend from the hills in early spring and migrate to the marshy areas for sexual assignation without being squashed on Henry Street. There's a new band called Salamander Crossing; heavy metal it's not. A famous local headline: "Well-Dressed Man Robs Amherst Bank." Amherst is an achingly democratic sort of place in which try-outs for Little League, with their inevitable rejections, have caused people to suggest that more teams should be created so that no one is left out. There are people in Amherst who still think "politically correct" is a compliment. The program notes for the spring musical "Kiss Me, Kate" pointed out politely that "The Taming of the Shrew," on which it is based, was "well, Shakespearean in its attitude toward the sexes."

The downtown area seems to support pizza joints, Chinese restaurants, ice-cream parlors and bookstores and not much else. It's hard to find a needle and thread, but if you wish you can go to the Global Trader and purchase for \$4 a dish towel with a rain-forest theme. The surrounding communities range from the hard and nasty inner-city poverty of Holyoke, the empty factories in Chicopee and the blue-collar scrappiness in Agawam to the cornfields and asparagus patches in Whately and Hatfield and Hadley and the shoppers' mecca that is Northampton. They tend to look on Amherst with eye-rolling puzzlement and occasional contempt as the town that fell to earth.

The girls on the Hurricanes know



LEFT: The Hurricanes, after losing to the Northampton Blue Devils two years running in the regional championships, finally beat their rivals, 63-41, this year.

BOTTOM: Jenny and Jamila beading for the lockers and their teammates after the game.

they live in a kindly, ruminative sort of place. Sometimes they joke about how if they weren't playing ball, they'd be "tipping cows" — a basically useless activity necessitated by the unfortunate tendency of cows to sleep standing up.

WITH THE PLAYOFFS LOOMING, the six senior girls — Jenny and Jamila, Kathleen Poe, Kristin Marvin, Patri Abad and Kim Warner — were treated to a late lunch by Jamila's father, John Edgar Wideman, winner of two PEN/Faulkners as well as numerous other awards, and author of the nonfiction meditation "Brothers and Keepers"; "Philadelphia Fire," a fictional visitation of the MOVE bombing in 1985; "The Homewood Trilogy," about growing up black in Pittsburgh.

It was at that lunch that the team's center, Kristin, in trying to sum up the peculiar, almost consoling, lack of outward drama in a town like Amherst, confessed that the night before she had had a dream. "My Mom and I, we went to Stop

and Shop and while we were there, we went down, you know, all our usual aisles in the regular order, picking out all the things we usually buy, and after that we got in line to check out."

"That's it?" said the other girls.

Jamila's father thought maybe the dream had another layer and so he tried a gentle psychoanalytic probe. He has a quicksilver face, his expression changing in a flicker from stormy to melancholy to soft and forgiving. Now it was contemptuous.

"Did you run into any unusual people?"

"No."

"How about money? Did you run out of money or anything?"

"No."

"Kristin," said her teammates, "that's so sad."

Kathleen, who is in the top 10 academically in her class of 250, told Jamila's father that she tried reading a collection of his short stories, "the one called 'Jungle Fever.'"

"I'm not Spike Lee. It was just 'Fever.'"

of Pennsylvania and a Rhodes scholar who played at Oxford, and his passion for the game is such that Jamila tells people she was born playing basketball. Girls' basketball is not boys' basketball being played by girls. It's a whole new game. There's no dunking. They can't jump as high. They can't play above the rim. But they can play with every bit as much style. And there's that added purity, that sense of excellence for its own sake. It's not a career option for girls; after college the game is over, so there is none of the desperate jockeying for professional favor.

As a black man, Wideman knows only too well the shallow triumph of token progress. He had told Kathleen's father, "This is just one team in one season." It alone cannot change the discrimination against girls and their bodies throughout history. But here in these girls, hope is a muscle.

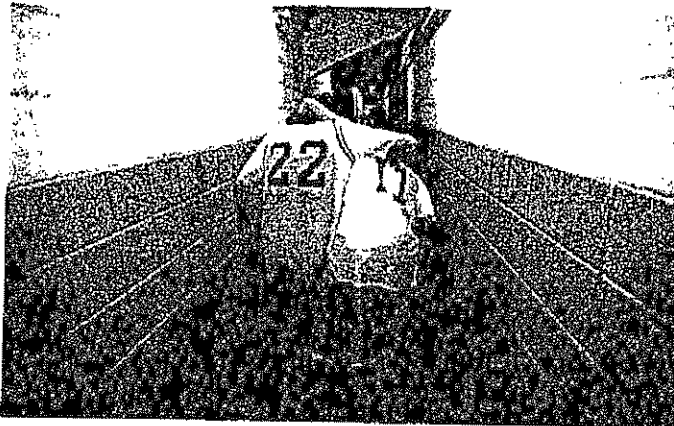
"Here's to the senior girls," he said, looking at all of them.

They hoisted their ritual glasses of water.

"This is," he said, "as good as it gets."

TO LOOK AT THEM, THESE SIX seniors on the team, who all appear to be lit from within, one would assume that their lives have been seamless journeys. In fact, as Jen Pariseau puts it, she does not come from a "Dan Quayle kind of family" — and neither do most of the others.

Whatever sadness or disruption they've been dealt, an opposite force follows them onto the court. Jenny and Jamila have not gone it alone; they have had Kathleen's strong right hand, an almost irresistible force heading toward the basket. She never wastes a motion: the ball is in her hands one second, then quietly dropping through the hoop the next, without dramatics, almost like an afterthought. There's Kris-





bones and Gumby and Grace and Skippy and Predator. They are warriors.

The girls crowd into a locker room. With much less commotion than usual, they dress in their baggy knee-length uniforms. They slap hands and stand tall. Meanwhile, the arena is redolent of hot dogs, popcorn, sweat and anticipation, one side of the bleachers filled with their people and the other side with the fans from Haverhill.

The girls walk out wordlessly. They look up.

You have to live in a small town for a while before you can read a crowd, especially in New England, where fences are deep in the soil. But if you've been in a town like Amherst for a while, you can go to an out-of-town game, even one in as imposing and cavernous a facility as the Centrum, and you can feel this sudden lurch of well-being that comes from the soothing familiarity of faces that are as much a part of your landscape as falling leaves, as forsythia in season, as rhubarb in June. You scan the rows, and for better, and sometimes for worse, you know who's who. You know whose parents don't talk to whom else and you know why. You know who has had troubles that never get discussed.

You see the lawyer that represented your folks or one of their friends in a land dispute or a custody case. You see the realtor who tried to sell a house next to the landfill to the new kids in town. You see the doctor who was no help for your asthma and the one who was. You see the teacher who declared your baby brother a complete mystery and the teacher who always stops to ask what your remarkable brother is up to now. You know which man is the beloved elementary-school principal, now retired. You recognize the plump-cheeked ladies from the cafeteria who specialize in homemade cinnamon buns for 55 cents. You see your family and you see the fathers and mothers and stepfathers and stepmothers of your teammates. You know whose brother flew in from Chicago for the game; whose step-grandparents came from Minnesota.

But what is most important about all this is how mute it is. The commonality is something that is understood, as tacit as the progression of the summer to fall to winter to spring, and just as comforting.

Usually there is a buzz of cheering at the start of a game, but this time the Amherst crowd is nearly silent as the referee tosses the ball.

The Haverhill center taps the ball backward to her point guard. She comes down the court, swings the ball to the wing, who instantly dishes it inside to the center. Easy layup. Amherst blinks first. Two-nothing. In the Haverhill stands, the crowd cheers. It is the only pure cheer they will get.

Within a few seconds, the score is 6-4 Amherst, and something truly remarkable takes place. The Hurricanes enter into a zone where all of them are all-Americans. It's a kind of controlled frenzy that can overtake a group of athletes under only the most elusive of circumstances. It's not certain what triggers it, perhaps it's Jamila's gentle three-pointer from the wing, or more likely, when Jen drives the baseline and as she swoops beneath the basket like a bird of prey she releases the ball back over her head, placing it like an egg against the backboard and through the hoop. It may have been 10 seconds later when Jamila steals the ball, pushing it down court in a three-on-one break, makes a no-look pass to Jen who just as quickly fires the ball across the lane to Kathleen for an uncontested layup. Whatever it is that started it, there is nothing Haverhill can do to stop it, and time-outs repeatedly called for by their hapless coach only fuel Amherst's frenzy further.

Even the sportscasters can't remember a 37 to 0 run in a state championship game. The halftime score is 51-6.

An astonished Amherst can hardly even cheer. One Amherst fan shouts: "Where's Dr. Kevorkian?" Another makes the very un-Amherst comment: "They should bring on the Haverhill boys for the second half."

Among the spectators is Kathleen's father, Donald Poe, an associate professor of psychology at Hampshire College, who saw how her defense, along with that of Kristin and Emily Shore, kept Haverhill's score so low.

When his son, Chris, was an infant, Donald Poe tried to teach him to say "ball" as his first word, until he was told that "b" is a hard sound for a baby. He expected a son to be an athlete, and when Kathleen came along he didn't have that expectation. Yet

whenever they go into the yard and she pitches a ball to him, it takes only five minutes before his hand hurts. She throws a heavy ball.

To him, what's important is not that Amherst win, but that the spirit of girls' sports endures. Next year, it doesn't have to be Amherst; it might be Westside in Springfield. Its junior varsity is undefeated. When he was in W. T. Woodson High School in Fairfax, Va., the girls were not allowed to use the boys' gym, which was fancy and varnished with a logo in the middle of the floor. The girls had a little back gym, without bleachers. After a game, whenever he saw the little kids asking his daughter for autographs, he was glad to see the girls, pleased that they now had models. But he was just as glad to see the boys asking to him their respect for the girls' team was just as important.

The final score is 74-36. After receiving the trophies and after collapsing in one huge hysterical teen-age heap, they all stand up. First they sing "Happy Birthday" to Kristin Marvin, who turns 18 this day. Then they extend their arms toward their parents, teachers, brothers, sisters, even to some of those 140 little girls whose parents have allowed them a school night of unprecedented lateness, and in one final act as a team, these girls shout, in the perfect unison that has served them so well on the court, "Thank you."

Back in the locker room, Kristin Marvin sucks on orange slices and sashes water on her face. She then stands on a back bench, raises her right fist, turns to her comrades and shouts: "Holy #@&! We're the #@&\*@# champions!" And then she loses it. For the next half-hour, she throws herself into the arms of one teammate after another. She cries and hugs, and hugs and cries, and so do they.

Coach keeps knocking at the door, trying to roust the stragglers. Finally, he announces he is coming in, and what greets him is a roomful of girls who return his level gaze with eyes that are rheumy and red as they sputter "last ... final ... never again."

He looks right at them and says: "You're wrong. This isn't the last. There will be more basketball." His tone is conversational, almost adult to adult.

"But ..." they start to say.

"I promise you. There will be lots more basketball."

Still they regard him with disbelief. They can't decipher his real message, at least not at this moment. They can't fathom how the word "basketball" might have more than one meaning.



VER. THE GAME was over. On the way home, they watched a videotape of the game. Jen was stunned at how it had all fallen into place: We were so fluid it was scary. While they watched themselves, television viewers all over the state were witnessing recaps of the highlights and hearing the verdicts of professional commentators who claimed these girls had wandered into the wrong league: They shoulda been playing Calipari's men at U Mass; they coulda taught the Celtics a thing or two.

The girls would hear all that in the days to come, but at this moment they were mostly thinking about the present — when truth itself had become a dream. The bus was going backward, retracing its earlier path, down the Pike back through Palmer, where the only sense of abundance is in the fast-food stores, then through Bonds-ville with its gin mill and the sunken rusty playground with a metal fence, back through the center of Belcher town, a singularly flat stretch in a town with a singularly unfortunate name, and back in and out of Pelham — thanks to Jen, on the map at last.

Kathleen Poe wished that the whole team could sleep that night in the gym at the high school, the coziest, most homey, softest place she could now imagine, that they could all sink into its floor, become part of it forever. She kept trying out rhymes in her head, phrases popping into her mind like sudden rebounds: top and stop, pride and ride, forever and sever, heart, smart, true, you.

*Hoop Phi is of an intangible, untouchable breed, It satisfies the soul, and a life-long need.*

*We represented our school, represented our sex, Now maybe both will get some well-earned respect.*

No one really wanted the ride to end. The bare trees, the velvety night air, the cacon of the bus itself.

At the town line there awaited another police es-

cort, this time back into town. The cruiser was once again full of proud, slow ceremony. At the corner of Main and Triangle, the cruiser seemed to lurch right to take the short-cut back to the school, but then as if that was only a feint, it continued to move forward, so that the girls would be brought through town the long way.

The bus, boisterous in its very bigness, moved past the red-bricked Dickinson home-stead with its top-heavy trees, tall and thin with a crown of green: *We're somebody; who are you?* Downtown was almost empty save for a couple of pizza eaters in the front window of Antonio's and a lone worker sweeping in the back shadows of Bart's Ice Cream. As the strobe lights from the cruiser bounced off the storefronts, the bus wheezed past St. Bridge's and the bagel place, turning right, then left, finally pulling into the school parking lot a few minutes shy of midnight.

All of a sudden one of the players shouted: "There are people there, waiting for us!" And, indeed, in the distance was a small crowd standing in the cold and in the dark, clapping.

When the bus came to a stop, Coach stood up. "I promise it won't be mushy. There's just one thing you should know. When you're the state champions, the season never ever ends. I love you Great job. And now, I'd like everybody else on the bus to please wait so that the team can get off first."

Often the Hurricanes will bound off a bus in a joyous squealing clump. On this night, they rose from their seats, slowly, in silence. *State champs!* For the final time this season, with great care bordering on tenderness, the teammates gathered their stuff, their uniforms, their shoes, their socks, their game faces and their courage. And then in a decision that was never actually articulated but seemed to have evolved as naturally as the parabola of a perfect three-pointer, the Hurricanes waited for captain Jen Pariseau to lead the way, which she did, and one by one the rest of the women followed, with captain Jamila Wideman the last of the Hurricanes to step off the bus into the swirling sea of well-wishers and winter coats.

Overhead the sky was as low-hanging and as opaque as it had been earlier in the evening, but it didn't need stars to make it shine. ■