



TOURNAMENT

The change in mentality continued and new habits were developed as the Eagles finished the regular season on a nine-game winning streak. Furthermore, those 12 guys ended up going deeper in the playoffs than any previous Eagles team had in school history.

After the final buzzer had sounded ending their amazing playoff run, the players walked to the locker room. Coach Dunn addressed this group one last time and then let the seniors say a few words.

Doing his best to hold back his emotions, Brandon spoke first.

“It seems like only yesterday I was a freshman. I can’t believe it’s done. I thought I’d win plenty of championships.”

Brandon took a deep breath.

“Obviously we didn’t win any championships during my four years. But I can honestly say that what we accomplished this year after starting out as we did may have been more satisfying than winning any trophy. I will never forget the way we came together during this journey.”

He couldn’t believe that the season, and his basketball career, was finished, but he had a sense of peace in knowing that he did what he could for the program.

“I’m so proud of you guys. I never wanted a season to continue more than I wanted this season to continue. Not because of the whole

‘survive and advance’ thing we all want at tournament time but because you guys are my family. We grew together this year and that is something I’ll never forget. Thanks, guys!”

Learie then stood up and walked to the whiteboard on the wall.

“Until we had that team meeting, I never liked these things,” he said pointing at the whiteboard.

“These boards were just something Coach would scribble on and write about things that I didn’t really care about. That bus trip. That meeting the next day. That stuff changed my life. I know you don’t expect me to be this deep, but it was about more than basketball for me.”

Learie took off his wristband and repeatedly stretched it out in front of his teammates.

“This little thing reminds me every day that those ten things we learned on that bus trip and in that meeting are things that we can do no matter how much talent we have as a basketball player, or in life, for that matter. I can apply all of those things to being a student, to being an employee one day, to being a husband, or a father.”

Antonio interrupted Learie, “Wait, is there something you haven’t told us?”

“Come on, man! I was pouring my heart out to you and you have to go and make a joke.”

“You’re right. My bad!”

Rolling his eyes and shaking his head, Learie continued.

“Anyway, I’m a better man, not just a basketball player, because I realized that I can display leadership in all aspects of my life. I can do those ten things in all areas of my life. Thanks for helping me see that.”

As Learie approached his seat, Coach Dunn walked over to him and gave him a big hug.

“I’m so proud of you. I never thought I’d be saying this to you, but you were key to us making this tournament run. We’re going to really miss you next year.”

“Coach, you’re going to make me cry. Stop that,” said Learie.

Coach Dunn released his grip on Learie, but he wasn’t quite finished with his praise.

“Your stats might not win you a place in the record books, but we’ll be talking about your legacy for quite a while. Thanks for stepping up and taking responsibility.”

From the corner of the locker room, Jaylen nudged forward on his crutches.

“I know that I’m not a senior, but I wanted to quickly say something.”

As one of the most respected people, not just on the team, but on the entire campus, all eyes were now on Jaylen.

“I think I speak for the entire team when I say to the captains, thank you for showing us a great example of leadership and helping inspire us all to not only be good followers but to step up and be leaders ourselves.”

Brandon and Learie nodded. They were appreciative of Jaylen and his words. He was already a positive leader and next year, he’d make a good team captain.

“As for you, Coach, thanks for trusting us enough and empowering us to develop as leaders. We learned that we’re all on this journey together.”

Jaylen adjusted his weight on the crutches before continuing.

“I wish this season wasn’t over, but the good news is our journey is still going on. I can’t wait to have some recruits on campus and for them to see our culture and share with them the main thing that we’re all about.”

Coach Dunn looked at Jaylen, picked up a marker, and then wrote something on the whiteboard.

“That’s exactly right, Coach. That’s the word. That’s what we’re all about. LEADERSHIP.”