

Free Throws for Heroes to benefit military families

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Wednesday will be a special day for Illinois high school basketball players as well as it is a historical day for Charity Stripe Executive Director, Mitch Salzstein.

Throughout the day, 200-300 schools across the state of Illinois will send their basketball players (girls and boys - freshman through seniors) to the foul line, A.K.A. the 'charity stripe' where each participant will shoot for the stars - and stripes.

High school basketball athletes will unite statewide, each shooting 50 free throws while collecting pledges from friends and family to raise money for families of active and veteran Illinois military families in need. Their efforts will be in honor of the inaugural one-day event, "Free Throws for Heroes."

Among those participating will be Daily Herald area schools Hampshire, St. Charles North, St. Charles East, Geneva, Batavia, Marmion, Schaumburg, Timothy Christian, Westminster Christian, St. Francis, Rosary, Hersey, Stevenson, Kaneland, West Aurora and Addison Trail.

Salzstein will see a dream 2 1/2 years in the making come true.

Snowed in at an airport a few years back, Salzstein observed an angry customer at the ticket counter screaming and complaining that he had to get home. Watching someone get so upset at the thought of a two-hour delay, his mind quickly went to daily news reports of United States troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan whose return to the states could be delayed months, sometimes years.

And so Salzstein created the cleverly named Charity Stripe, a 501c3 not-for-profit charitable organization dedicated to raising funds for American families in need who are experiencing financial hardship due to military service.

His vision was to see America's basketball coaches, teams, players and fans come together for a series of rotating annual charitable free throw shooting events.

"Charity stripe is the nickname for the foul line," Salzstein explained. "I wanted to bring it to life and give it new meaning. In life, people want to step up to the line and help others which is exactly what they will do here."

A September pitch to both the IHSA board as well as the IBCA (Illinois Basketball Coaches Association) quickly rendered unanimous support.

Westminster Christian varsity boys basketball coach and IBCA board member Bruce Firchau was in attendance.

"The decision to back this was absolutely a no-brainer," said Firchau. "We enthusiastically accepted it and endorsed it.

"This is about helping the families of soldiers in need."

According to Firchau, Free Throws for Heroes was a natural choice for Westminster Christian as 2006 graduate Alex Fiebig is currently in Afghanistan.

"This is a great cause," said Firchau. "Any time you can devote yourself to something bigger than you, you become part of something great. I know the kids here are behind it 100 percent.

"We've always tried to create ways to make free throws mean something. Now they really will."

For Westminster varsity girls coach Ken Flickinger, whose son Ethan Flickinger could be deployed upon completing special operation's training, Free Throws for Heroes hits home.

"The nice thing about this program that it is teaching kids how to make a difference," said Flickinger. "Every single kid can be involved, and it's very easy for them to see that they can help and that they matter."

According to Salzstein, the program's simplicity mixed with its symmetry to real life is the foundation of Free Throws for Heroes.

"When it comes to free throws, it doesn't matter how tall you are, how talented you are or how old you are," Salzstein said. "Anyone and everyone can help.

"In game situations, coaches often use fouling at the end of a game, and it can determine the outcome. Now, it can affect the outcome of people's lives."

Hampshire sophomore Kelsey Watson will certainly have someone in mind when she squares up to the line - her father.

A Major in the Air Force, Matt Watson flies KC 135s and has been to Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia while traveling the world. He was involved with Operation Enduring Freedom as well as Operation Iraqi Freedom. Watson was also a member of Medivac helping transport injured soldiers to hospitals.

"Having the opportunity to do this is really cool," said Kelsey Watson. "It isn't that often that you hear about students donating money to the military.

"My teammates and I are very excited. Not a lot of people my age know all of what's going on in Iraq in Afghanistan, but they are all happy to help out."

Born on an Air Force base, Kelsey Watson moved around quite a bit before finally settling in Hampshire.

"Awareness is not the same here," she said. "This is awesome because I feel like I am a part of it again, and my friends and I can help."

Matt Watson is certain of one thing.

"Military members and their families will greatly appreciate this," he said. "More than anything, they will appreciate the fact that everybody is willing to help."

For St. Charles East boys varsity basketball coach Brian Clodi, this is the perfect opportunity to do just that - help.

"We certainly wanted to do our part as a basketball team to help a program give back to our country," Clodi said. "Any chance that we can help military families in need is a chance we will take and a chance well worth taking."

The response from coaches, athletes and others has far exceeded Salzstein's expectations.

In fact, because of Free Throws for Heroes the Suburban Basketball Officials felt so honored to be a part of Illinois basketball that they agreed to donate all of their checks on Wednesday to the cause.

"The support has been incredible," said Salzstein. "Everybody is stepping up making free throws that make a difference to others. This is a very emotional thing that we're doing here. We're making free throws that make a difference to others."

While Free Throws for Heroes has its roots here in Illinois Salzstein hopes to see the program go nationwide and offer a number of initiatives in the future.