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Prep beat

# JIM PETERS: Victory Christian volleyball team re-defines champion

Jim Peters Times Columnist Nov 19, 2014



Jamie Carlson Photography

The Victory Christian Academy volleyball team displays its National Association of Christian Athletes Division III tournament championship banner. The team gave the first-place trophy to Forest Lake (Fla.) Academy after the school was unable to complete due to religious reasons. The VCA team includes Gabby Carlson, Lauren Knapp, Elly Smith, Madison Bailey, Kala Pawlicki, Debby Tiffany Romeos, Mckayla Huber, Jessica Jones, Alexa Seymour, Taylor Cross, Leighton Huber and Autumn Thomae. Coaches are I Huber, Michelle Thomae and Peter Carlson.

Much of what we write about revolves around contests, games, matches and meets whose outcomes have a winner and a loser.

Victory Christian Academy's selfless display of sportsmanship at the recent National Association of Christian Athletes volleyball tournament in Dayton, Tenn. redefined the term champion.

"The NACA director said he had been doing it for many years and had never seen anything like it before," Victory Christian senior Gabby Carlson said.

Chances are, no one ever will again.

Victory Christian reached the Division III double-elimination bracket final undefeated. It faced Forest Lake (Fla.) Academy, a school with a number of families who are Seventh Day Adventists. Forest Lake had one loss, so a Victory Christian win would give the Lions the title. A loss and they have to play a winner-take-all match. Maybe.

"Before the game, our principal (Joyce Folk) came up to us (the coaches) and explained the situation, that there was a chance we might not play if we lost," VCA coach Megan Huber said.

Seventh Day Adventists strictly observe the Sabbath, so they are unable to participate in athletics between Friday's sunset and Sunday's sunrise.

Forest Lake and not long after, Carlson and her teammates noticed players hanging their heads, wiping away tears. The VCA girls had not yet been informed of the circumstances, so they didn't know why.

"We were confused at first," Carlson said.

The teams exchanged pleasantries following the awards ceremony, during which VCA was presented the champion's banner and trophy.

"Right away, we were like, oh my gosh, we don't want to win that way," senior Lauren Knapp said.

The coaches gathered the team one more time and sensing something wasn't right, they offered them the option of keeping the trophy or giving it to Forest Lake.

"Immediately, everyone said, 'Give them the trophy,'" Carlson said. "As soon as she looked at us, all 13 of us said it at the same time."

What ensued was a moment all in attendance will forever remember. Huber only wishes it had been captured on video. Knapp described it as a bundle of crying and hugging as her team headed to the Forest Lake girls to hand them the trophy, parents pouring from the stands to join in.

"It's something I'll never forget," Huber said. "Even talking about it, I can't express how I felt. I can never recreate it."

Carlson recalled at the beginning of the season how her team said they played first for the glory of God and second to win.

"It literally and figuratively happened," she said. "We have eight seniors and we didn't want to end our season, to finish our legacy, that way. We tried to think of a way to approach the situation and we felt it was only fair. It's going to be such a different team next year, we wanted to present them something to follow after we're gone, something to remember, and that's exactly what we accomplished. (Forest Lake's) excitement was so rewarding."

Many of the VCA seniors have played volleyball together since fifth grade and Knapp couldn't think of a better punctuation mark. Make that an exclamation point.

"It was the best way to end our season, our last game," she said. "It was even better than being able to win."

The trophy now resides in Apopka, Fla., while the banner has a home at VCA, a Valparaiso school with about 75 students in grades 9-12. Along with it is the sportsmanship trophy that originally went to Forest Lake. They gave it to VCA. Given our weather, I think an invitation to the Sunshine State would have been better, but that's just me.

NACA responded in kind by declaring both schools co-champions.

"There were speakers each night and a lot of the focus was how it's not about the stats, it's what happens with your life afterward," Huber said. "Whatever sport you play, that's what's going to last."

Amen.

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This column solely represents the writer's opinion. Reach him at [james.peters@nwi.com](mailto:james.peters@nwi.com).

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### **Jim Hunsley**

Jim is a sports writer for The Times who works out of Valparaiso. A South Central High School (1984) and Ball State ('89) grad, he's covered preps most of his career. He received the Indiana High School Wrestling Coaches Association's Media Award in 1997.

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### **Jim Peters**

Jim was keeping standings on his chalkboard from the time he could print and keeping kickball stats in grade school at St. Bridget's. He covers all manner of prep sports for The Times and is a long-suffering Chicago Cubs fan.

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