



Carrie Berran, center, Eagan, talks basketball with Lee, left, Ellen Slawin, Emma Berran, Carrie Berran, and Dave Hrbacek/The Catholic Spirit

Before playing a state championship game earlier this year, the players on Carrie Berran's seventh-grade girls basketball traveling team gathered for prayer.

Berran hadn't expected or suggested it, since the team was from a public youth athletic association, but she joined in with the girls. As a parishioner of St. John Neumann in Eagan, it seemed natural for her to do so.

"I've heard them talk about it before, which is neat because it's all organic from the girls," Berran said. "It was really neat to see them do that. Everyone participated."

Berran, who won the inaugural Jr. NBA Coach of the Year award June 26, has connected faith and sports for years. That includes daily prayer and having attended Mass with her former women's basketball teammates when she played NCAA Division I hoops at LaSalle University in Philadelphia during the late 1990s.

The Jr. NBA coach award goes to a youth basketball coach who demonstrates "outstanding integrity, character and leadership" according to the Jr. NBA. Each NBA team chose a nominee, and coach interviews with the NBA and the Positive Coaching Alliance whittled down the candidates to 11. Votes by a panel of NBA and WNBA players, along with a vote on Twitter, determined the three finalists.

Driven to teach life lessons

Berran, a coach and recent basketball president for the Eagan Athletic Association, received the Minnesota Timberwolves' nomination. She had some connection with the local NBA organization, having worked with the Timberwolves & Lynx Basketball Academy.

"She is driven to teach players [and] families life lessons through winning and losing," said Timberwolves & Lynx Basketball Academy Manager Troy Pearson in an email to The Catholic Spirit. "Coach Berran is a tremendous tactician, teacher, motivator and leader. Her players play with obvious reduced amount[s] of anxiety and boosted self-confidence; they compete with respect and have fun."

While Berran successfully meets the demands of coaching and serving in youth athletics on top of working as a human resources representative, she demonstrates her faith in subtle ways. It especially

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By Matthew Davis • The Catholic Spirit

guides how she treats her players, which starts when the girls walk into the gym. Each player greets Berran and her two assistant coaches with a handshake while catching up briefly.

"It's just a great way to practice life skills," Berran said. "I feel like it's a nice way for us, for the coaches, to bond with the girls."

Practices may have their fun moments, but include plenty of work on fundamentals. For instance, the players run through competitive free-throw shooting drills to prepare for close games.

"She not only makes you a better athlete, she makes you a better person while playing," said Ellen Slawin, who played for Berran's seventh-grade team. "She pushes you to the limit."

During games, Berran gives all the players equal time on the court. The Eagan Athletic Association doesn't require equal playing time, but Berran believes all youth players have potential to develop. Sometimes it helps her teams win, too.

Once, she brought in a girl late in the game just to hit free throws. The player received a pass, clutched the ball and quickly drew a foul. The girl then sank the free throws to secure a win.

"We both smiled at each other. ... 'Yep, it worked out,'" Berran said.

With a plethora of weekend tournaments, Berran makes Sunday Mass a priority, working around the game schedule. She said going to Mass rejuvenates her.

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Carrie Berran, center, of St. John Neumann in Eagan, talks basketball strategy with Kiersten Lee, left, Ellen Slawin, Jocelyn Plonski and Emma Berran, Carrie's daughter.
Dave Hrbacek/The Catholic Spirit

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"One thing that I love is that we're there

worshipping with all these people. You're part of this greater community [at Mass]," Berran said. "I leave every week feeling I have something I can take with me, and inspired to be a better person."

Berran's coaching endeavors started when she attended Centennial High School in Circle Pines. She coached youth softball and basketball in addition to playing varsity girls hoops for the Chiefs at the time.

Berran went on to play at LaSalle University where she met her husband, Matthew. They moved to Minnesota after college, and Berran has been coaching in the Eagan youth program for 10 years. That includes coaching all four of her children — Mary, Will, Jake and Emma, who played this year on her seventh-grade traveling team.

'She's always encouraging us'

Besides coaching, Berran served as the traveling basketball president for the Eagan Athletic Association until this year. She stepped down when she returned to full-time work at Hydra-Flex in order to balance time with family.

Berran had been raising four children at home while coaching and serving with the Eagan Athletic Association on the side. She volunteered at St. John Neumann as a teacher in the Sunday school program and on a committee for first Communion. She taught her four children as they came through the program.

Emma Berran said her mother approached teaching the faith with the same enthusiasm she has for coaching. "She's always encouraging us," she said.

Those classes, she said, involved a fair amount of craft projects, which her mom enjoys.

Carrie Berran has also shared that love with her basketball teams as a way to build community. Each season, she makes a picture collage that includes comments from each player and coach about where they succeeded. She normally shares them with the team after the season ends.

This year, she decided to share it before the state title game. Her team went on to win, but the way they won stood out to her.

"The girls walked into that game not only feeling confident about the game plan, but [also] confident about their skills and their place on the team," Berran said. "We could have lost that game, but they just went out there and owned the court."