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Sports

Ellington scores big among youth at camp

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By Neil Geoghegan, Journal Register News Service

BERWYN -- It wasn't difficult to pinpoint the theme of Wayne Ellington's speech to about 40 teens attending a basketball camp this week at Conestoga High School. The former Episcopal Academy star and University of North Carolina standout mentioned hard work at least a dozen times during his appearance on Tuesday morning.

Wearing a UNC t-shirt, NBA socks and carrying an official Minnesota Timberwolves basketball with him, Ellington -- a Mercury All-Area selection as a freshman at Daniel Boone -- spent about 15 minutes addressing the youngsters, with a question and answer session to follow. Just five days earlier, Ellington was selected 28th in the first round of the NBA Draft by Minnesota.

"When I was a youngster, it always helped when somebody who played the game at a pretty high level gave me some words of encouragement," said Ellington, who acknowledged that his start in basketball came at a summer camp much like the one at Conestoga.

"My message to the kids is that having faith and believing in yourself and your ability is very important. And if you put hard work with those two things, it usually pays off."

Ellington was the featured speaker for the third annual Skill Development Camp, put on by Dewey Burke, who graduated from Conestoga in 2002 and made the team at North Carolina as a walk-on.

"I went to all of the camps around here like at Villanova and 5-Star," Burke said. "It really helped me to learn the type of things I needed to work on as a kid. So one of my goals after I graduated from UNC was to start a camp back her at my alma mater."

This is the first of three, week-long camps Burke is offering this summer. The next will be held in Springfield, Delaware County. Burke recently started an education firm in North Carolina which focuses on after-school tutoring for underprivileged kids and does some side work for a sports marketing firm.

"What better person to put in front of these kids than a guy like Wayne, who was just drafted and obviously had a great junior year and was the MVP of the Final Four," said Burke, who remembers being influenced by former La Salle superstar, Lionel Simmons, who went on to play seven seasons in the NBA and scored nearly 6,000 career points.

"I remember I was about 10 and going to the Malvern Basketball Camp and Lionel Simmons came to talk to us," Burke recalled. "I remember being mesmerized by his size and his skills. I watched him and thought that I want to work like he worked and find out what I can achieve. He blew me away."

Ellington, 21, had the same type of impact on Tuesday. His college career ended in storybook fashion in April when the Tar Heels won the 2009 NCAA Championship. A year earlier, Ellington considered bolting to the NBA, but did not hire an agent and ultimately returned to help guide Carolina to the crown. He scored a combined 39 points in the semifinals and finals and was named the tournament's most outstanding player.

"It was definitely a dream come true," Ellington said. "Going through that experience is so hard to put into words. It was the best decision of my life. There is no money in the world that can match that."

When asked to sum up Ellington's message, 13-year-old camper Jack Conroy hardly skipped a beat: "Hard work and dedication," he said.

"It's pretty cool," the Wayne resident and Valley Forge Middle School student continued. "Usually, guys in the NBA are real busy so it's great that he took the time to come and talk to us."

"He already accomplished lots of goals – like winning the NCAA championship and being drafted in the first round. But he still has goals he wants to achieve for the NBA. That is impressive because he is not satisfied."

For Burke, the camp is an opportunity to teach basketball skills, but also pound home some life lessons.

"I am not as physically gifted as some of the guys I played with, like Wayne," he acknowledged. "But the hard work, dedication and intensity pays off. And it doesn't have to be about basketball. That lesson is true in anything they chose to do."

Burke was a senior with the Tar Heels when Ellington was a freshman in 2006-07. And even though Burke was a walk-on and Ellington had the McDonald's and Parade All-American high school pedigree, he looked to his older teammate for guidance.

"Dewey is my guy," Ellington said. "He was a great role model for a young guy like myself in college. So whenever he asks me to do something like this, I know it's for a great cause."

"We all have great respect for Dewey. He loves the game and he's all about giving back."

And now that Ellington has reached the pinnacle of his aspirations, he is trying to do the same.

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