

Idaho basketballers lead students

Reading program rewards young scholars with free admission to games, prizes

By Ben Handel, Daily News staff writer |

When Idaho men's basketball coach Don Verlin first came to Moscow, he knew he wanted to make a difference in the community - he just wasn't sure what exactly he wanted to do.

"I knew I wanted to get everyone in the community involved in Vandal athletics, so I brainstormed with coach (Chris) Helbling and Dr. (Michael) Pickard," Verlin said. "Every kid needs to read when they come home from school, so we decided we wanted to get them excited about reading and Vandal athletics. It's a win-win for everybody."

Pickard and Verlin spearheaded the Readers as Leaders program, which rewards young students for meeting certain goals with a T-shirt that allows free access to Idaho basketball games for the rest of the year. Pickard Orthodontics sponsors not only the T-shirts, but also other prizes.

"We also have a silver and a gold level to reward those kids that go the extra mile," Pickard said. "When they achieve that award, each kid has his or her name go into a drawing. Each school has a gold reader who will win a Kindle - silver gets a gift card. On top of that, one kid from the gold level will win the grand prize of a new laptop."

The program is in its fifth season and has grown rapidly since its inception in Verlin's first year at Idaho. It started with just a pair of local schools but has spread to 11 local elementary schools, including Logos, Troy and Potlatch. Overall, roughly 2,400 children are involved in the program.

"Because there is a substantial difference in age and reading ability from classroom to classroom, every student has a different goal as set out by his or her teacher," said Dr. Cindy Bechinski, principal of McDonald Elementary. "For some kids it's the number of books, for others it's the number of nights or a set time."

On Wednesday the basketball team visited Russell Elementary and McDonald Elementary to promote the program and give some advice to the young students. After Verlin addressed the young crowd about the importance of working hard in school and having a good attitude, he introduced his players. The players talked about where they are from and what their favorite book was when they were kids.

Verlin entertained the children by asking trivia questions about each player, whether it was about freshman Ty Egbert's size-17 shoes or the agricultural export for which senior Wendell Faines' home state of Nebraska is famous.

"When you walk in there and everyone is just screaming for you, it really does take you back to when you were a kid," senior Mike McChristian said. "I always like going to the schools and seeing the kids' reactions when they meet us - it's definitely a fun thing to be a part of."

Megan, 7, said her favorite player was the "tall one." When asked to elaborate, she clarified she liked the one with the "poofy hair" (probably Faines).

Tristan, also 7, said Joe Vandal is still his favorite, but he added he likes Stephen Madison because they share the same favorite book (Harry Potter).

"This is a great event because it is very motivational and connects the schools with the university," Bechinski said. "The kids love seeing some of their role models and it has really had a great effect."

Saturday's basketball game against Walla Walla University is the team's Readers as Leaders Kickoff Game. Students wearing their shirts will receive free admission, while their accompanying parents receive a discount on general admission tickets and can get in for five dollars. Tipoff is at 7:05 p.m. at the Cowan Spectrum.

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