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March Mission: A tourney that gives kids a shot

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LOWELL -- The phrase March Madness triggers feelings of excitement and memories of great moments. The NCAA basketball tournaments are great. The atmosphere created is unique and distinctive.

But another tournament, one I'd describe as the March Mission, opened my eyes this past week to another unique basketball experience.

The Greater Boston Basketball League Tournament took up residency at UMass Lowell's Costello Gymnasium this year.

I know, you're probably not familiar with the tournament. You're wondering what makes it so special. What is this tournament's grand mission?

The Greater Boston Basketball League is comprised of alternative high schools or schools with programs specializing in educating students with special educational needs.

For nearly 30 years the tournament has provided an opportunity for students to interact with students from other schools as well as letting them compete, experience success, experience defeat, and learn about sportsmanship and teamwork.

"For a lot of my guys, it's the only thing they really belong to," Lighthouse school coach Chris Linskey says of the basketball program.

The Lighthouse School and the Merrimack Education Center (MEC), are both located in Chelmsford and are just two of the members of the league that includes Dearborn Academy, the Newton Pilot Program, the Curtis-Tufts School, Seaport Campus, the Holden School, the Harbor School, the Bay Cove School, the LABB Collaborative Program and others.

Paul Hourihan from Dearborn, Paul Connolly from the Newton Pilot Program and Linskey have each been involved with the program for 13 years or more. They've taken over the duties of organizing the yearly endeavor.

The Horace Mann School, Boston University and Bentley University each served as previous homes for the tournament. UMass Lowell and facilities director Amy Lisavich opened the door for the tournament to take place at Costello Gymnasium this year.

Linskey, a former basketball player at Wilmington High School and a graduate of Plymouth State College, got involved with the program shortly after being hired as a teacher at the Lighthouse School. He recalls getting started because, "I played basketball my whole life and I got an opportunity to work with kids that needed a little bit extra."

This year's tournament featured 16 teams spread out into four evenly matched divisions. The tournaments are divided that way purposely in order to create more chances to compete for a tournament title.

A three-point shooting competition and a slam-dunk competition are also part of the festivities, and there are definitely some marksmen and several high-risers to rival the NBA All-Star weekend.

While trophies were given for tournament champions, tournament all-stars and tournament MVP, sportsmanship was also rewarded with a trophy. Each trophy also held added significance. Names of former players and coaches who have passed away appear on the awards. Original tournament organizer Lou Bianchi, former coach John Erickson and former players Billy Thurston and Jamal Ball each have awards named in their honor.

Thurston's design serves as the logo on the tournament T-shirts.

The coaches and referees create a competitive environment, but one which simultaneously keeps the overall mission in the forefront. That is to say they stress having fun, fair play, working as part of a team and respecting opponent as a way of building a foundation on the court that can lead to achievement in the classroom.

Clearly, the student-athletes aren't the only ones who benefit from the experience.

"I've been involved in basketball one way or another for 25 years," Linskey says. "This (working at the Lighthouse school and coaching basketball) is the most rewarding thing I've been ever been involved with."

It has been confirmed. March really is a magical month.

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