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Excel Basketball Camp Celebrates 30 Years

By Todd Bequette

A visitor to the Excel in Basketball Camp is struck first by the noise. In the camp's ball handling drills, hundreds of basketballs thunder on the court in a gym crowded with inspired youngsters.

This year Excel, the life's work of Frank Allocco, the celebrated high school basketball coach at De la Salle, celebrates its 30th anniversary. Every summer, parents in basketball crazy Lamorinda send their children to learn from Allocco, whose success as a high school coach is legendary: he is the only coach to win state championships at two different high schools. He has garnered both state and national high school Coach of the Year honors.

But for all his coaching success, the achievement for which Allocco is most proud is the creation of Excel, a unique basketball clinic where the sport is a vehicle for teaching character and self-improvement through old school discipline. "Coaching has been great," remarked Allocco, "but my passion is inspiring kids to be better people; teaching them to live the right way."

Excel campers also attend a daily lecture by Allocco. The coach, who played both basketball and football at the University of Notre Dame, draws on his vast experience in the sports arena, imparting lessons

Frank Allocco talks to campers Photo provided

of good character, citizenship and self-improvement.

At the essence of Excel, true to its name, is achieving the "winning edge," a mantra of the late Stu Aberdeen, who coached Allocco as a youth and died of a heart attack at age 43. "I know it sounds corny, but on the day of his death I dreamed the camp," says Allocco, who founded Excel even before embarking on his coaching career.

Excel campers quickly learn that the key to achieving the winning edge, both on and off the court, is profound in its simplicity: Outwork your opponents, get the edge and succeed. "Don't say hello when it's time to say goodbye," is one of Allocco's favorite lines. "You only have so much time to improve," the coach explains. Excel campers are taught to seize the day, reach their potential, and have no regrets about what might have been.

In a time when youth sports in suburban communities like Lamorinda have trended toward a "trophies-for-all" philosophy, Excel makes no apologies for encouraging competition. Boys and girls compete in free throw, ball handling and one-on-one contests. "In this day and age, given the economic climate, competition is not only a sports skill, it's a life skill," says Allocco.

Allocco's passion for the camp is on display every day. He can be seen bouncing from station to station, giving personal instruction and encouragement to kids at every skill level. Far from a Camp Director in name only, every camper has his shot videotaped and personally analyzed by Allocco.

Excel's basketball fundamentals are interwoven seamlessly with life lessons. Recently, the concept of team defense, or "help defense," found its way to the campers' homes in the form of a homework assignment. Campers were asked to find a way to help out at home, a lesson appreciated by many unsuspecting parents.

The mantra of hard work and good citizenship is enforced in individual skill sessions, manned by local high school coaches and college players past and present, many of whom are Excel alums. Greg St. Jean, an Excel camper of many years, now coaches at the camp. "As far as basketball goes, Excel is unparalleled," says St. Jean, currently the captain of his college team at Wesleyan University. "In addition to basketball, Excel has taught me many life lessons, and I am very grateful."

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