

PRECEDING PAGE: Primed to attack, Jade Sharpe (No. 12), Patri Abad (15) and Rita Powell (55) leading the Mutricanes into their final bome game, a 56-34 playoff victory over Langmendow, The Antherst girls would go on to face their archrivals, the Northampton Blue Devils.

RICHT: Jen Pariseau, called Cloudy by ber teammates because of the high arch of her threepointers and foul shots, bis 4 for 6 from the foul line when the Hurricanes beat the Blue Devils, 63-41, in the Western Mass Regional finals.





ABOVE: From left, Carrie Thorp, Jesti Denis, Kim Warner, Pairi Abad, Kathleen Poe and Jade Sharpe listening to Coach Ran Moyer charge them up before the Longmeadow game.

TOP CENTER Coach explaining the finer points of his Help defense to Lucia Maraniss (No. 32), Sopbie King and Jade Sharpe.

HE VOICE OF THE COACH rises above the din of shuffling footsteps, loud greetings, the slamming of metal, the thud of books. "Listen up. I want you to check right now. Do you have your uniforms? Your shoes and your socke? Do you have any other items of clothing that might be needed?"

Coach Ron Moyer believes it's

possible to pack abstractions along with one's genr, intangibles like "intensity" and "game face" and "consistency" and "defense." As the members of the Amherst Regional High School girls' bosketball team

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prepare to board the Hoop Phi Express on their way to the Centrum in Worcester more than an hour away for the Massachusetts state championship, he tells them, "Today, I want

you to pack your courage."

The team is 23-1 going into this game, losing only to Agawam, which, like the Haverhill team they are fac-ing this evening, has some real height. Haverhill, known for aggressive ball, nothing dirty but just short of it, has two girls over six feet nichnamed Twin Towers. Moyer has prepped his team with a couple of specialized plays, the Murphy and the skoelace, and he tells them: "Expect to play a title for the play a little football." Amherst girls have a reputation for being afraid to threw their elbows, but this year they have learned to take the words "linesse team" as an insult. Although Coach has been careful to avoid saying "state championship" to good his team, last fall he did tell one aging gym rut in town: "I have the two best guards in the state and probably the nation, but it all depends on the girls up front There's an old saying -

'Guards win games, but forwards win championships.' We'll have to see." At 8 foot 8, Moyer looms over his

players. With a thick cap of graying brown hair and bangs that flop down over his forehead, he resembles a grizzly bear on spindly legs. The girls are more like coits. For Moyer, turning them into a team has nothing to do with breaking their spirit and every-

thing to do with harnessing it.
As Jen Pariseau listens to Coach before leaving for Worcester, her legs can't stop twitching. One of the six seniors on the team playing high-school hoop together for the last time, she has thick, dark eyebrows and long, lanky limbs. For her, tonight's game is the perfect revenge, not just against Haverhill but also against some of the rebulfs she suffered as an athlete on the way up. For three years, she played on one of Amherst's Little League teams, the Red Sox, She was pitcher, shortstop and first base-man. When it was time to choose the all-stor league, she was told her bunts were not up to par.
Jen's teammates are just as hyped

up. Half of them are giving the other half piggybacks. There are into of hand-sispping and nudges. They swirl around one another, everyone making a private point of touching Jamila Wideman, Jen's co-captain, as if one





ABOVE: Jamila Wideman (No. 11), the Predator, successfully directing the charge against the dreaded Northampton Blue Devils.

dark-haired, brown-eyed girl could transmit the power of her playing to all the others. Jamila is an all-America, recipient of more than 150 offers. of athletic scholarships. On the court, the strong bones on her face are like a flag demanding to be heeded; she is a study in quickness and confidence, the ball becoming part of her body. Her nickname is Predater.

Jen Pariscau is two-time all-Western Mass, and together the two guards delighted fans all season with the way they delivered the ball to each other, semetimes in a dipsy doo behind the back or between the legs, often in an open shot. JennyandJamile. In Amherst, it's one word.

Couch pauses. He looks as though he is about to rebuke the girls for all the squirming, but he shrugs and gives a big smite. "Let's go." Then, perhaps more to himself than to them: "While we're still young."

SHORTLY AFTER 5 IN THE evening, the sky is thick and gray and hooded, the cloud cover a welcome hedge against what has been a bitter New England winter. The has the girls board is different from the usual.

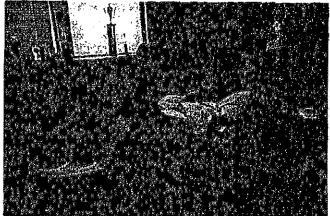
"Hooked up and smooth," says Jen

HELOW: In Amberst, they are known as jemyana jamila, one word, co-captains of the Hurricanes. Jamila Wideman, top, during a contemplative

moment in her bedroom, She plans to pursue law and African-American studies at Stanford. Jen Pariseau, bottom, calls the wall above her hed she "strong

women wall" because it is covered with pictures of her favorite rate niodels. She is planning to play ball for Darimouth and to major in engineering.





Pariseau, admiring the special features, including upholstered sents, a toilet, four television sets and a VCR mounted on the ceiling - a definite step up from the yellow tin cans they have taken to every other game. There are some cheerlenders on the bus as well as Tricia Lea, an assistant ceach with her own high-school memories about what it was like to go up against those Hillies from Haverhill in their brown and yellow uniforms with the short shorts, "Haverbili. I don't know what they eat up there, but they can be slightly ruthless. Sportsmanship does not run very deep in that town."

A few years back, Coach had trouble convincing players and their familles of the seriousness of the commitment to girls' basketball. Jennyand-

Jamila remember playing in varsity games five and six years ago when the gym would be empty of spectators except for their parents and maybe a few lost souls who had missed the late bus. Coach remembers girls who would cut practice to go to their boyfriends' games, and once during the playoffs, a team captain left to go on a school-sponsored cultural exchange for three weeks in the former Soviet Union. As far as he's concerned, the current policy could not be clearer: You want cultural exchange? You can have it with Hamp.

Tonight, Amherst is sending three "pep" buses to the game, unproce-dented support for an athletic event, boys' or girls'. Amherst is a place that tends to prize thought over action. tofu over toughness. It prefers to honor the work of the individual dedicated to a life of monastic scholarship rather than some noisy group effort. But this season, there were sellout crowds. There was even that ultimate badge: a wary cop on the premises for the first time in the history of a girls' event.

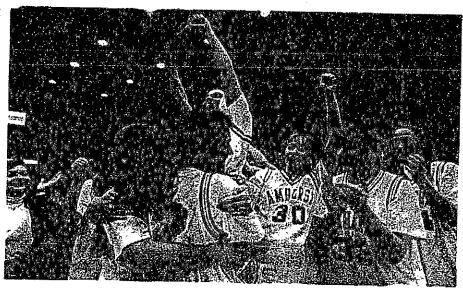
Anaherst is a college town, with the usual benign ineffectuality that college makes most towns as maddening as they are charming and livable. When the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a contest for town mono, Moyer submitted one that he sdli thicks should have won - "Amherst: Where sexuality is an option and reality is an aiternative."

Amherst is, for the most part, smake free, nuclear free and eager to

free Tibet. Ponchos with little projectiles of fleece have never gone out of style. Banners stretch across South Pleasant Street at the town common, including the vintage "Spay or Neuter Your Pet, Prevent Abandonment & Suffering." This is a town that saves spotted salamanders, creating love turmels (at taxpayers' eager expense) so that they can all descend from the hills in early spring and migrate to the marshy areas for sexual assignation without being squashed on Henry Street There's a new band called Salamander Crossing; heavy metal it's not. A famous local headline: "Well-Dressed Man Robs Amherst Bank." Amherst is an achingly democratic sort of place in which tryouts for Little League, with their inevitable rejections, have caused people to suggest that more teams should be created so that no one is left out. There are people in Amherst who still think "politically correct" is a compliment. The program notes for the spring musical "Kiss Me, Kate" pointed out politely that 'The Taming of the Shrew," on which it is based, was "well, Shakespearean in its attitude toward the sexes."

The downtown area seems to support pizza joints, Chinese restaurants, ice-cream parlors and bookstores and not much else. It's hard to find a needle and thread, but if you wish you can go to the Global Trader and purchase for \$4 a dish towel with a rain-forest theme. The surrounding communities range from the hard and nasty inner-city poverty of Holyoke, the empty factories in Chicopee and the blue-collar scrappiness in Agawam to the cornfields and asperagus patches in Whately and Hatfield and Hadley and the shappers' mecca that is Northampton. They tend to look on Amherst with eye-rolling puzziement and occasional contempt as the town that fell to earth.

The girls on the Hurricanes know



they live in a kindly, ruminative sort of place. Sometimes they joke about how if they weren't playing ball, they'd be "tipping cows" — a basically useless activity necessitated by the unfortunate tendency of cows to sleep standing up.

WITH THE PLAYOFFS LOOMing, the six senior girls — Jennyand-Jamila, Kathleen Poe, Kristin Marvin, Patri Abad and Kim Warner — were treated to a late lunch by Jamila's father, John Edgar Wideman, winner of two PEN/Faulkners as well as numerous other awards, and author of the nonfiction meditation "Brothers and Keepers"; "Philadelphia Fire," a fictional visitation of the Move bombing in 1985; "The Homewood Trilogy," about growing up black in Pittsburgh.

It was at that lunch that the team's center, Kristin, in trying to sum up the peculiar, almost consoling, lack of outward drame in a town like Amherst, confessed that the night before she had had a dream.

"My Mom and I, we went to Stop

and Shop and while we were there, we went down, you know, all our usual aisles in the regular order, picking out all the things we usually buy, and after that we got in line to check out."

"That's it?" said the other girls. Jamila's father thought maybe the dream had another layer and so he tried a gentle psychoanalytic probe. He has a quicksilver face, his expression changing in a flicker from stormy to metancholy to soft and forgiving. Now it was contemplative.

"Did you run into any unusual people?"
"No."

"How about money? Did you run out of money or anything?"

"Kristin," said her teammates, "that's so sad."

Kathleen, who is in the top 10 academically in her class of 250, told Jamila's father that she tried reading a collection of his short stories, "the one called 'Jungle Fever."

"I'm not Spike Lee. It was just Fever." LEFT: The Hurricanes, after loxing to the Northampton Blue Devils two years running in the regional championships, finally beat their rivals, 63-41, this year. BOTTOM Jennyand Jamila beading for the lockers and their trammates after the game.

"Mr. Wideman, I tried reading it," said Jen Pariseau, also in the top 10 academically. "I found the shortest story I could, and you know what? I think I understood it. I can't guarantee it, but I think I did."

He looked at his guests at the table, a blur of happy faces and ponytalls. Their teasing was a joy. He is a former basketball player for the University

of Pennsylvania and a Rhodes scholar who played at Oxford, and his passion for the game is such that Jamila tells people she was born playing basket-ball. Girts' basketball is not boys' trasketball being played by girts. It's a whole new game. There's no dunking. They can't jump as high. They can't play above the rim. But they can play with every bit as much style. And there's that added purity, that sense of excellence for its own sake. It's not a career option for girls; after college the game is over, so there is none of the desperate jockeying for professional favor.

As a black mon, Wideman knows only too well the shallow triumph of token progress. He had told Kathleen's father, "This is just one team in one season." It alone cannot change the discrimination against girls and their bodies throughout history. But here in these girls, hope is a muscle.

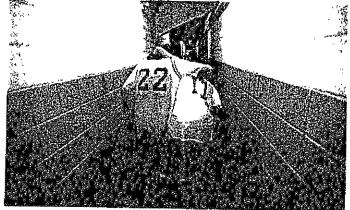
"Here's to the senior girls," he said, looking at all of them.

They hoisted their ritual glasses of water.

"This is," he said, "as good as it gets."

TO LOOK AT THEM, THESE SIX seniors on the team, who all appear to be lit from within, one would assume that their lives have been seamless journeys. In fact, as Jen Pariseau puis it, she does not come from a "Dan Quayle kind of family"—and neither do most of the others.

Whatever sadness or disruption they've been dealt, an opposite force follows them onto the court. JennyandJamila have not gone it alone; they have had Kathleen's strong right hand, an almost irresistible force heading toward the basket. She never wastes a motion: the ball is in her hands one second, then quietly dropping through the hosp the next, without dramatics, almost like an afterthought. There's Kristleen



tin. Her flushed cheeks are not a sign of exhaustion but of some pri-vate fury. When the ball comes curling out of the basket, more often than not it is Kristin who has pushed and shoved her way to the prize.

The only underclass starter, Emily Shore, is so serious about her chance to play with the famous JennyandJamila that she spent the bulk of her summer lifting weights and battling in pickup games on Amherst's cracked and weather-ravaged outdoor courts with a succession of skeptical and then grudgingly appreciative young men.

They have become what every opponent fears most: a team with a mission.

As good as it gets. That is, of course, the exact sentiment the girls feel toward their fancy bus.

"Fasteo your seat belts," says Coach. "Beverage service will commence shortly after takeoff. There'll be turbulence coming to Haverhill when the Hurricanes hit Worcester." Then he announces the people to whom he would like them to dedicate the entire season. "And that's to the 140 girls who are now playing youth basketball in Amherst for the first time this year."

Jen Pariseau says she wants to read a letter from Diane Stariton, the mother of Chris Stanton, the star of the boys' basketball team.
"Jenny and Jamila," the letter be-

gan. Diane Stanton said she was addressing them because she knew them best, but the letter was for the whole team. "Your existence as a team represents a lot of things to a lot of women like me. . . . As a young girl I remember standing outside the Little League fence and watching the boys and knowing that I could hit and catch better than at least a third of them. When our high-school intramural field bockey team and softball team asked for leagues, we were told flatly NO, because there was no money. . When this group of girl athletes got together to form an intramural baskethali team, we were subjected to ridicule and anger from some of the student body. ... I lost courage, I'm embarrassed to admit, in my junior year and would no longer play intramural sports. Part of it was a protest against the fadure of my school . . . to recognize that we needed to play as much as boys. I know the struggle."

OACH GIVES THE DRIVER a signal and the vehicle starts A police car just ahead suddealy activates its lights and in a slow ceremony leads the vehicle to the corner of Main and Triangle Streets, where another officer has been summoned to stop traffic. Coach is beaming and silently thanks his old pai, Capt. Charlie Scherpa, over in the Police Department for coming through. In addition to being a guidance counselor, Moyer has been the girls' coach off and on since 1981, a task he enjoys because unlike with boys, whose arrogance and confidence often have to be eroded before he can get the team to work, this is all constructive. The way to build a girls' team is to build their individual self-confidence.

The bus heads down Main (a street that is most famous for being the site of the house where Emily Dickinson was born, where she lived, died and wrote her poetry) to the corner of Northeast, where they get to run a red light, turning in front of Fort River Elementary School, then heading out to Route 9, where the escort lasts all the way to the town line. In an instant, the sign that says "Entering Pelham" appears, and in another instant a new one looms ahead that says "Entering

The girls watch the film they had chosen unanimously to pump them for the game - "A League of Their Own." The six seniors are lost in their own thoughts.

Kim Warner knows her mother, who works in personnel at the University of Massachusetts, will be at the game, plus her two sisters, plus her boyfriend's family. Her father lives in Florida, and although she sends him news accounts of all the games, he has never seen her play. She hasn't seen him since the 10th grade. She plans to go to Westfield State and major in early childhood education. On the way to the game, Kim writes a fantasy letter in her head: "Dear Dad, At long last a lot of hard work paid off."

Patri Abad's mother, a bilingual teacher, has to be at work, and although Patri will miss her, she knows she can count on a large cheering section of friends. She aimost didn't get to play this year. During her junior year, she had moved to Chicago with her mother and her new stepfa-ther. Patri, who is Cuban on her father's side and Puerto Rican on her mother's, prayed incessantly to the Virgin. She received constant mail from teammates like Lucia Maraniss, back when Lucia was a gushing eighth grader: "Patri, I will always remember you as one of the wisest, most caring and compassionate pecple I've ever met. I'm going to miss you very, very much."

Whether it was divine intercession or that 14th "very" from Lucia, the resolve of Patri's mother to stay in Chicago eventually vanished. They returned to the Happy Valley, as Amherst is called, and Patri could finish her senior year as a member of the Burricanes. She has been accepted at Drew, Clark and the University of Massachusetts, pre-med.

Kristin Marvin, also known as Jolly, Jolly Green and Grace (her teammates have misinterpreted her tenacity as ciumsiness), is going to Holy Cross College, pre-med. She likes medicine because it has a strong element of knowability. Her parents were divorced when she was young and she lived with a lot of uncertainty. Her mother has since married a builder whose (irst wife married Kristin's father, who works in Connecticut and often rushes to the games after work in his business suit. The marital realignment has created a circumstance in which the daughter of her steplather and stepmother is Kristin's double stepsister.

Coach cails Kathleen Poe his silent assassin — the girl with two distinct personalities. The demure senior with the high grades, with applications at Williams, Haverford, Duke and Dartmouth is Kathleen: the girl on the court is her ferecious twin, Skippy. He concocted the di-chotomy because when Kathleen first started playing she said "Excase me" all the time and would pause to pick her opponents up off the floor. She wants to be like Jamila: semeone you don't want to meet on the court but who will be a good friend off it.

Jamila plans to study law and African-American studies at Stanford. Like her mother, Judy Wideman, who is in her second year of law school, she hopes to be a defense attorney. As a child of mixed races, she has told interviewers she identifles not with being black or white but with being herself. Still, her bedroom has pictures of Winnie Mandela. Jesse Jackson and the children of Soweto. After the riot in Los Angeles, she wrote several poems that reflected her feelings.

In "Black," she wrote:

I walk the tightrope between the fires

Does anyone know where I fail through? Their forked daggers of rage re-

flect my eye Their physical destruction passes

meby Why does the fire call me?

Jen is known locally as the best thing that ever happened to Pelham, which is that little twinge on the highway on Route 9. Since Jen was 2 and her brother, Chris, was 4, they have lived with their father, who is a manager of reservoirs and water treatment in Amherst. She is planning to play ball for Dartmouth and to major in engineering. She turned down Princeton, especially after the recruiter, who made a home visit, would not let her father, who has a

stutter, talk.
The door to her room is plastered with Nike inspirational ads. She calls the wall above her bed her "strong women wall," and it is filled with pictures of her favorite role models, including Ann Richards and Toni Morrison. By her bedside, she keeps a clothbound book -- given to her by her teammate Rita Powell in which she writes favorite quotes, a customized Bartlett's.

Marilyn Monroe: "If I'm going to be alone, I'd rather be by myself." Colette: "You will do foolish things.

but do them with enthusiasm.

Zora Neale Hurston: "The dream

THE TEAM BONDING AMONG these six seniors and the 10 younger girls is one reason they have played so well: the sisterhood-is-powerful quest for unity. They have a team song, "Real Love," and they have team trinkets (beaded necklaces with their names and plastic rings and scrunchies with basketballs), team teddy bears, team towels. At team dinners, Jamila's mother carbo-loads them with slivered chicken cooked in garlic and oil and lemon and served on a bed of noodles. The meals often canclude with a dozen or so girls linking arms in a tight circle, swaying, singing, shouting, "Hoop Phi!"

To witness adrenalin overload at its most frenetic, nothing beats the atmosphere on one of those vellow buses on the return home after a victory over Hamp. Northampton is a fine town, birthplace of Calvin Coolidge, home of Smith College. But, as Jen Pariseau says: "Something happens when we play Hamp. Both teams be-come brutes." Hamp fans are always trying to demoralize Jennyand Jamila with the scorpful chant: "You're overrated; you're overrated."

A victory against Hamp, especially on their territory at Feiker gym, especially in front of at least 1,000 people with several hundred more turned away at the door, was a great moment to whoop and cheer the whole way home, to sing Queen's farmous anthem, "We Are the Champions," to slap the ceiling of the bus, to open the windows and to shout

Who'll rock the house? The Hurricanes will rock the house.

And when the Hurricanes rock the house

They rock it all the way down.

But even though they beat Hamp in the Western Mass Regional finals, they weren't really champions - not yet. Do they have what it takes, these sweet-looking girls reared in maple syrup country on land that includes the Robert Frost trail? Playing before a few thousand fans in what is almost your own backyard is nothing compared with a stadium that seats 13,800, where real pros play. Rocking Felker is one thing, but the Cen-

When the bus finally pulls in front of the Centrum and it is time to leap off, the girls have faces like masks. To the world, they are a bunch of teen-age girls; inside their heads. they are commandes. To the world, these teen-agers have pretty names: Patri, Kristin, Jen, Kethleen, Kim, Jamila, Sophie, Jade, Emily J., Emily S., Jan, Lucia, Carrie, Rita, Jessi, Julie. But as far as the girls are concerned, they are the codes that encapsulate their rare and superb skills, their specialty plays, their personal styles. They are Cloudy and Cougar and Jonesbones and Gumby and Grace and Skippy and Predator. They are warriors.

The girls crowd into a locker room. With much less commotion than usual, they dress in their baggy kneelength uniforms. They slap hands and stand tall. Meanwhile, the arena is redolent of hot dogs, popcorn, sweat and anticipation, one side of the bleachers filled with their people and the other side with the fans from Haverhill.

The girls walk out wordlessly. They look up.

You have to live in a small town for a while before you can read a crowd, especially in New England, where fences are deep in the soil. But if you've been in a town like Amherst for a while, you can go to an out-of-town game, even one in as imposing and cavernous a facility as the Centrum, and you can feet this sudden lurch of wellbeing that comes from the soothing familiarity of faces that are as much a part of your landscape as falling leaves, as forsythia in season, as rhubarb in June. You scan the rows, and for better, and sometimes for worse, you know who's who. You know whose parents don't talk to whom else and you know why. You know who has had troubles that never get discussed.

You see the lawyer that represented your tolks or one of their friends in a land dispute or a custody case. You see the realtor who tried to sell a house next to the landfill to the new kids in town. You see the doctor who was no help for your asthma and the one who was. You see the teacher who declared your baby brother a complete mystery and the teacher who always stops to ask what your remarkable brother is up to now. You know which man is beloved elementaryschool principal, now retired. You recognize the plumpcheeked ladies from the cafeterla who specialize in homemade cinnamon buns for 65 cents. You see your family and you see the fathers and mothers and steplathers and stepmothers of your teammates. You know whose brother flew in from Chicago for the game; whose stepgrandpurents came from Minnesota.

But what is most important about all this is how mute it is. The commonality is something that is understood, as tach as the progression of the summer to fall to winter to spring, and just as comforting.

Usually there is a buzz of cheering at the start of a game, but this time the Amherst crowd is nearly silent as the referee tosses the ball.

The Haverhill center taps the ball backward to her point guard. She comes down the court, swings the ball to the wing, who instantly dishes it inside to the center. Easy layup, Amherst blinks first. Two-nothing. In the Haverhill stands, the crowd cheers. It is the only pure cheer they will get.

Within a few seconds, the score is 6-4 Amherst, and something truly remarkable takes place. The Hurricanes enter into a zone where all of them are all-Americas. It's a kind of controlled frenzy that can overtake a group of aniletes under only the most elusive of circumstances. It's not certain what triggers it, perhaps ir's Jamila's gentie three-pointer from the wing, or more likely, when Jen drives the baseline and as she swoons beneath the basket like a bird of prey she releases the ball back over her head, placing it like an egg against the backboard and through the boop. It may have been 10 seconds later when Jamila steals the ball, pushing it down court in a threeon-one break, makes a nolook pass to Jen who just as quickly fires the ball across the lane to Kathleen for an uncontested layup. Whatever It is that started it, there is nothing Haverhili can do to stop it, and time-outs repeatedly called for by their hapless coach only fuel Amherse's frenzy further.

Even the sportscasters can't remember a 37 to 0 run in a state championship game. The halftime score is

An astonished Amherst can hardiy even cheer. One Am-herst fan shouts: "Where's Dr. Kevorkian?" Another makes the very un-Amherst comment: "They should bring on the Haverhill boys for the second half,"

Among the speciators is Kathleen's father, Donald Poe, an associate professor of psychology at Hampshire College, who saw how her detense, along with that of Kristio and Emily Shore, kept Haverhill's score so low.

When his son, Chris, was an infant, Donald Poe tried to teach him to say "ball" as his first word, until he was told that "b" is a hard sound for a baby. He expected a son to be an athlete, and when Kathlean came along he didn't have that expectation. Yet

whenever they go into the yard and she pitches a ball to him, it takes only five minues before his hand hurts. She throws a heavy ball.

To him, what's important is not that Amherst win, but that the spirit of girls' sports endures. Next year, it doesn't have to be Amherst: it might be Westside in Springfield. Its junior varsity is undefeated. When he was in W.T. Woodson High School in Fairfax, Va., the girls were not allowed to use the boys' gym, which was fancy and varnished with a logo in the middle of the floor. The girls had a little back gym, without bleachers. After a game, whenever he saw the little kids asking his daughter for autographs, he was glad to see the girls, pleased that they now had models. But he was just as glad to see the boys asking; to him their respect for the girls' team was just as Important.

The final score is 74-36.

After receiving the trophies and after collapsing in one huge hysterical teen-age heap, they all stand up. First they sing "Happy Birthday" to Kristin Marvin, who turns 18 this day. Then they extend their arms toward their parents, teachers, brothers, sisters, even to some of those 140 little girls whose parents have allowed them a school night of unprecedented lateness, and in one final act as a team, these girls shout, in the perfect unison that has served them so well on the court, "Thank you."

Back in the locker room, Kristin Marvin sucks on orange slices and sloshes water on her face. She then stands on a back bench, raises her right fist, turns to her comrades and shouts: "Holy #@&"! We're the "@#&"@# champions!" And then she loses it. For the next half-nour, she throws herself into the arms of one teammate after another. She cries and hugs, and hugs and cries, and so do they.

Coach keeps knocking at the door, trying to roust the stragglers. Finally, he announces he is coming in, and what greets him is a roomful of girls who return his level gaze with eyes that are rhourny and red as they sputter "last ... final ... never again."

He looks right at them and says: "You're wrong. This isn't the last, There will be more basketball." His tone conversational, almost adult to adult.

"But. . . . " they start to say.

"I promise you. There will be lots more basketball."

Still they regard him with disbelief. They can't decipher his real message, at least not at this moment. They can't fathom how the word "bas-ketbail" might have more than one meaning.

VER. THE GAME.

was over. On the way

home, they watched a

videotape of the Jen game. was stunned at how it had all fallen into place: We were so fluid it While they was scary. watched themselves, television viewers all over the state were witnessing recaps of the highlights and hearing the verdicts of professional commentators who claimed these girls had wandered into the wrong league: They shoulds been playing Calipari's men at U Mass; they coulds mught

the Celtics a thing or two.

The girls would hear all that in the days to come, but at this moment they were mostly thinking about the present - when truth itself had become a dream. The bus was going backward, retracing its earlier path, down the Pike back through Palmer. where the only sense of abundance is in the fast-food stores, then through Bonds. ville with its alo mill and the sunken rusty playground with a metal fence, back through the center of Belchertown, a singularly flat stretch in a town with a singularly unfortunate name, and back in and out of Pelham - thanks to Jen, on the map at last.

Kathleen Poe wished that the whole team could sleep that night in the gym at the high school, the coziest, most homey, softest place she could now imagine, that they could all sink into its floor. become part of it forever. She kept trying out rhymes in her head, phrases popping into her mind like sudden re-bounds: top and stop, pride and ride, forever and sever, heart, smart, true, you.

Hoop Phi is of an intangible, untouchable breed. It satisfies the soul, and a life-long need. We represented our school, represented our sex. Naw maybe both will get some well-earned respect.

No one really wanted the ride to end. The bare trees, the velvety night air, the cacoon of the bus itself.

At the town line there awaited another police escort, this time back into town. The cruiser was once again full of proud, slow caremony, At the corner of Main and Triangle, the cruiser seemed to lurch right to take the short-cut back to the school, but then as if that was only a feint, it continued to move forward, so that the girls would be brought through town the long way,

The bus, boisterous in its very bigness, moved past the red-bricked Dickinson homestead with its too-heavy trees. tall and thin with a crown of green: We're somebody; who are you? Downtown was almost empty save for a couple of pizza eaters in the front window of Antonio's and a lone worker sweeping in the back shadows of Bart's Ice Cream. As the strobe lights from the cruiser bounced off the storefronts, the bus wheezed past St. Bridget's and the bagel place, turning right, then left, finally pulling into the school parking lot a few minutes shy of midnight.

All of a sudden one of the players shouted: "There are people there, waiting for us!" And, indeed, in the distance was a small crowd standing in the cold and in the dark, clapping.

When the bus came to a stop, Ceach stood up. "I promise it won't be mushy. There's just one thing you should know. When you're the state champions, the season never ever ends. I love you Great job. And now, I'd like everybody else on the bus to please wait so that the team can get off first."

Often the Harricanes will bound off a bus in a joyous squealing clump. On night, they rose from their seats, slowly, in stience. State champs! For the final time this season, with great care bordering on tenderness, the teammates gathered their stuff, their uniforms, their shoes, their socks, their game faces and their courage. And then in a decision that was never actually articulated but seemed to have evolved as naturally as the parabola of a perfect three-pointer, the Hurricanes waited for captain Jen Pariseau to lead the way, which she did, and one by one the rest of the women followed, with captain Jamila Wideman the last of the Hurricanes to step off the bus into the swirling sea of well-wishers and winter coats.

Overhead the sky was as low-hanging and as opaque as it had been earlier in the evening, but it didn't need stars to make it shine.