

WEDNESDAY,
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ORR STORY DESERVES A TITLE

Neighborhood violence couldn't derail Spartans, whose inspiring season will be defined by more than state championship **TELANDER, PAGES 86-87**

BLACKHAWKS 4, CANADIENS 2

KANE & UNABLE

WINGER TALLIES 3 POINTS, BUT ANISIMOV LEAVES WITH INJURY **76-77**



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BREAKING DOWN
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TOP TO BOTTOM**
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FRED ZWICKY/AP

LEADING OFF



**RICK
TELANDER**

STAMP THEM CHAMPS

Class 2A basketball title brings some joy to Orr and its players in midst of violence

When I started following the Orr Academy High School basketball team in November, it wasn't because I thought it was a good squad.

It was because the school was in the center of the West Side gun violence, and I wanted to see how the players and coaches dealt with an atmosphere that at times mimicked the chaos of war.

I had no idea the Spartans would win the Illinois High School Association's Class 2A state championship Saturday in Peoria.

"I always knew we were going to win it!" Orr assistant coach Jimalle Ridley said to me moments after Orr's 59-39 victory against downstate Mount Carmel.

Ridley's neat blue dress shirt — he always dresses in a blue shirt, dark slacks and loafers — was soaked from a water-dumping.

Head coach Lou Adams, a wry, occasionally volcanic man, gave me a big, wet hug.

"I love you!" he said.

Adams was loving everybody, even this hapless good-luck charm who one time was asked to address the team during a practice without having a clue as to what to say.

On that day in the silent gym, with the players sitting on the floor and looking up at me in a chair, I thought back to my teen years so

long ago, to my troubles then, to my fears, to my mistakes.

I saw myself in those boys. That they were black and poor and that I was white and had grown up middle-class was irrelevant.

I think I told the players that they were blessed to have this sport, that they needed to think before they acted, that being a teen is a curse and a blessing.

Orr's season had been a glorious one, with brief stumbles (such as one-point losses to Class 4A schools Whitney Young and Curie) before a dominant march to the Class 2A title.

But no matter. Glory was manifest and empowering.

I had talked with Orr principal Shanele Andrews in January, asking her about the challenges faced by her students, now just a dwindling 400 in a building designed to hold 2,100.

"Our kids struggle with so many socioeconomic issues," she said. "We have kids who have had family member after family member killed, sometimes in front of them."

Try concentrating on your math quiz after that.

I quickly came to know the players as individuals, as adolescent athletes with personalities as varied as their sizes.

Star forward Raekwon Drake,



Orr players celebrate their victory in the Class 2A state championship game Saturday in Peoria. | WORSOM ROBINSON/FOR THE SUN-TIMES



Read Rick Telander's five-part series that followed Orr Academy High School's season at chicago.suntimes.com.

6-5 and agile as a cat, was dedicated and quiet. Like most of the others, he had a dream.

"My dream school would be Michigan State," he said of playing at the next level.

Senior guard Alex Flute was also focused and quiet. A team captain, along with Drake, he gave everything he had on every play.

Guard Brian Hernandez, the lone Latin player on the team, was a basketball nutcase who would leave after Orr practices and games and find another gym to play some more. His smiling mom, Luz, came to every game.

Emanuel O'Neal and Sam Williams, both 6-3 and fast, played with a frenzy that might have developed as a release from their turbulent lives off the court.

Dannie Smith, a 6-5 center/point guard whose two best friends were shot and killed in November, had so much discipline that I often wished

he could lay down his burden and relax. After the championship, I shook his hand and congratulated him. He looked me in the eyes, not blinking, revealing nothing, and said, "Thank you."

Then there is junior swingman Tyron Mosely, perhaps my favorite because he is bright, mischievous, skinny as piano wire and exudes a rare hoops talent that flies in all directions.

Adams screams at Mosely constantly, even yanking him from the title game and shoving him in his bony chest. But Adams put Mosely back in 30 seconds later, and the kid played well. Plus, he loves Adams, screams and all.

"He's a father figure," Mosely