**Red Devils help Drake win one for his late mother**

**It's always interesting when Owensboro High School wins a 3rd Region Basketball Tournament because there is so much history, so much tradition, so much pride involved.**

**We'll get to that momentarily, but we must first attend to present-day matters in the aftermath of the Red Devils' 64-58 gut-check victory over relentless Muhlenberg County before 4,500 fans on Tuesday night at the Sportscenter.**

**For, the seeds of this sweet triumph may well have been sewn on Jan. 27 when Betty Drake, mother of OHS head coach Rod Drake, passed away. It was in the aftermath of that sad occasion that the Red Devils became the team everyone expected them to be throughout the 2013-14 season.**

**"It was rough, but these guys kept me straight, they kept me going," said Drake, pointing at his players and assistant coaches as they excitedly waited to accept the regional championship trophy. "Basketball was my refuge during that stretch, and these guys weren't going to let me down."**

**Drake, a good and proud man with a glorious hoops history, paused to remove his spectacles and dry his eyes. To no avail. Still, the tears streamed down his face.**

**"It's funny," Drake said, regaining his composure, "but during that time we started playing some of our best basketball. That's when our team started to mature, started to grow up and come together — that's the point in the season when we turned it around."**

**Things weren't so grand back back in the dark days of December, when Owensboro opened the season with a loss at McLean County and, in fact, stood 4-6 through 10 games. Since then, the Red Devils have gone 17-4 and have more or less played like a whirlwind — evoking days of yore, when it seemed like the Devils reached the Sweet 16 every year.**

**They didn't, of course, but Tuesday's victory will send Owensboro to the KHSAA state tournament for a record 42nd time, and the storied program will be making its first appearance since 2008. The Red Devils last won the state championship in 1980, when coach Bobby Watson's final team was led by Dwight Higgs and a fellow named Rod Drake.**

**"That's never left me," Drake said of the memory of that triumph. "Now, taking Owensboro back as a coach, well — it's a feeling that can't be described. You work and you work and you work to get it done, and — now we're going back. The emotion of it all is just too much to take in right now. It's unbelievable."**

**Like all outstanding coaches (and you'd better believe he fits into this category), Drake was quick to give the credit to his players, who took their lumps on their way to the top.**

**"We were getting our (butts) kicked when these players were freshmen, but these guys decided to go to work and turn this thing around the past couple of months," Drake said. "We're a different team than we were at the start of the season. You could see the confidence growing, see the momentum building.**

**"But you've still got to win the big one to get where you want to go. Tonight we did it, and it's because this team simply refused to lose.**

**"It's a happy time."**

**Indeed, there was a broad smile on the face of every Owensboro fan who could be seen on Tuesday night.**

**And there was a broad smile on the face of one more Red Devil fan who couldn't be seen, but whose captivating, indelible spirit nonetheless was felt immesely — Betty Drake.**

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