ROGERS PARK — Most basketball team chaplains offer guidance from above.

Loyola University’s 93-year-old Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt provides that for the men’s team, yes. But her pre-game prayers also include some verses from the sacred book of hardwood hoops.

About 25 minutes before tipoff, Schmidt delivers a blend of devotion and scouting report — observations about the opponent’s best 3-point sinkers, free-throw shooters and rebounders.

"I was like, wow, she knows more than me," said Jordan Hicks, a senior guard/forward from Rochester, Minn.

Schmidt also tells the Ramblers to "never flop" on defense. And she doesn't forget to include the referees in her thoughts.

"She doesn't hide her disdain for the officials. She might pray for a little extra guidance for them and hope they have a little extra knowledge," said head coach Porter Moser.

When Moser took over the program two years ago, “Sister Jean,” as she is known throughout the campus, sent the new coach evaluations of every returning Loyola player.

Schmidt, who was honored with her own bobblehead doll last season and was the star of "Sister Jean Day" on Dec. 1, said she's simply doing God's work.

"I just feel that I'm bringing people closer to God and making them realize what life is all about," said Schmidt, who lives on the first floor or Regis Hall, a dorm with 400 freshmen.

This Saturday, Schmidt is expected to pump up the Gentile Arena crowd with a passionate pre-game speech, one that will acknowledge the historic crossroads of basketball and justice.

The game will honor the 50th anniversary of the matchup of Loyola and Mississippi State on March 15, 1963, a game that defied a Mississippi rule that said schools from the Magnolia State couldn’t play integrated teams like Loyola's.

"It was called 'The Game of Change,'" said Schmidt, who is celebrating her 75th year as a nun. "Basketball changed on the courts of countless universities in the United States" after that game.
"There was a lot of talk among us that maybe they wouldn't be able to show” at the tournament game in East Lansing, Mich., said Schmidt. “We were hoping they would sneak out."

Loyola, which featured several African-American players in its starting lineup, beat Mississippi State on its way to the national championship — still the only Division I men's hoops title for a school from Illinois.

Schmidt, who became the team’s official chaplain in 1996, was a basketball fan even back then. She watched the 1963 championship game victory over Cincinnati on a small black-and-white TV at Loyola's sister school, the former Mundelein College on Sheridan Road.

She arrived from California to teach at Mundelein in 1961 and never left. She was hired by Loyola in 1991 after Mundelein, a women’s college, was incorporated into Loyola.

Ramblers senior standout Ben Averkamp, a forward from Germantown, Wis., had heard about Schmidt before he visited the campus. She’s a “really big deal,” he said, “just a wonderful person.”

The last of the 27 nuns hired from Mundelein remaining at Loyola's campus, Sister Jean still packs in a heavy workday.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, she travels with students from Rogers Park to Loyola's downtown campus on the Shuttle Line bus. When students wait in line to return north, Schmidt talks to each of them and distributes informational fliers on all types of campus events.

On Tuesdays and Fridays, Schmidt works as a receptionist at a doctor's office associated with St. Joseph's Hospital. Her evenings are spent running prayer groups and other events, such as ice-cream socials, before she calls it a night, usually by 10:30 p.m.

Schmidt also is a co-chair for the "Reimagine Campaign", a multimillion dollar, five-phase project that's transforming part of the Rogers Park campus into a "new center of student life."

"I asked her the other day if I could be her apprentice," said Carolyn O'Connell, the school's senior associate athletic director for student development. "She transcends every group on this campus. I can't imagine this campus without her."

The mere presence of Schmidt, who played basketball when she was young and the girls' court was divided into three sections, is enough to fire up the crowd during games. Loyola's "Rowdies" — superfans of the men’s and women’s basketball teams — have cardboard cutouts of her. She also appears on a video, telling the fans on the Gentile Arena's big-screen TV that she's "Rambler Proud."

"There could be not much to cheer about, and she'll come on the megascreen and everybody screams and hollers," Hicks said. "She gets the most applause of anyone."
After games, Schmidt sends detailed emails with notes for every player — always complimentary.

"I feel like she lifts everybody's spirits," said Hicks, who noted how Schmidt helped welcome him to the team when he arrived at the school as a homesick 17-year-old.

Schmidt, who first thought about becoming a nun when she was in third grade, said she has no intention of stopping work, cheering or leading. She's in good health, and she said she rarely thinks about her age.

And she can't wait to rock the Gentile Arena for Saturday's anniversary matchup.

"It was an exciting time, and that's what we're going to celebrate," she said.