Loyola men's basketball chaplain, a 93-year-old nun, is full of team spirit

By Jodi S. Cohen
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It was minutes before game time and the Loyola Ramblers entered the tunnel, ready to rush onto the basketball court.

But there was one last order of business.

The team huddled with a 5-foot-tall, 93-year-old nun wearing a Nike workout top, black skirt and maroon sneakers with gold laces. "Sister" was embroidered on the heel of one shoe. "Jean" on the other.

The players bowed their heads. "As we face the Vikings today, we know what we have to do. We can win and we are going to go out there and do it," said Sister Jean, who stands nearly two feet below the tallest player. "We want to watch especially No. 3 and No. 21 and No. 33. We have beaten them before and we can do it again. So get in there and do it well and don't get hurt."

"Amen."

Officially, Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt is the chaplain for Loyola University Chicago's men's basketball team. But after nearly 20 years in that position, she's become so much more. Students chant "Sis-ter Jean" before games, and referees pose for pictures with her. She even has her own bobblehead.

The tiny woman with the short white hair and thick trifocals is the team's adopted grandmother, or more aptly given her years, its great-grandmother.

On Saturday her prayers came true when the team won its last regular-season game, 87-60, against Cleveland State University before going on the road for the Horizon League playoffs that begin Tuesday night.

And as much as the student athletes say Schmidt keeps their spirits up, the truth is that Schmidt needs them, too. She is the star of Gentile Arena, and her face lights up the minute she walks in the door.

Born in 1919 in San Francisco, Schmidt said she wasn't necessarily an athlete growing up, but she played on her Catholic high school basketball team.
After graduation she joined the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and she spent two decades working as an elementary school teacher and principal and coaching girls basketball, volleyball, softball and track.

She took a job teaching at the Catholic all-women's Mundelein College near Loyola's campus in Rogers Park in 1961. She was still there 30 years later when the college affiliated with Loyola.

Loyola's then-president saw Schmidt in the stands at basketball games and in 1994 asked if she could help the team. Its chaplain, a Jesuit priest, was retiring, and the team needed a replacement.

"I said, 'I have never been a chaplain to a basketball team before, but I would love to do it,'" she said.

And she's done it ever since, along with many other duties at the school. Three days a week she ministers to students riding the university's shuttle bus, handing out prayer cards during finals week and reminding them of upcoming events. She lives in a dorm with 400 freshmen.

While most of Loyola's sports teams have a chaplain, she is the only woman to serve in the role.

When Loyola introduced new head coach Porter Moser last year, Schmidt was there in her customized Nikes in the school's colors.

"She gave me a high-five when I walked into the press conference," Moser said. "And five hours later, I got an email from her evaluating every single current player on the roster."

Schmidt prays with the team before they take the court, and leads the fans in an opening prayer before game time. When the broadcaster introduces the team, she is the last one announced — and gets the loudest applause.

After each game she sends an email to Moser and a separate one to the players. A typical note will include some analysis: "You executed the ball well"; some religion: "As always, we ask our God to help us earn a WIN"; and some gentle reminders: "You must use your time management skills as you prepare for finals which will be here very soon."

Every team member gets his own version of the email, ending with Schmidt's thoughts on that player's performance.

"She knows exactly what each person did in that game, what we brought to help the team, and she reminds us of it," said sophomore Joe Crisman, a guard. "She tells us to keep at it, and that is huge. It means everything."

On Saturday, Schmidt arrived at Gentile Arena about an hour before game time and didn't stop working the arena until tipoff, circling the court and shaking hands with her fans.

She may not know everybody's name, but they all know hers.
"There she is," referee Tim Fitzgerald said, pointing to Schmidt as he walked onto the floor.

"Sister Jean, we love you!" screamed senior Andrew Gaillardetz.

"She's the center of the men's basketball program," said university Provost John Pelissero. "We pay (coach) Porter to do that, but Sister Jean is the inspiration."

Schmidt smiled at the compliments and shook her head, but she was clearly enjoying it.

Frank Biga, 64, a longtime fan with courtside seats, offered Schmidt some pregame advice.

"The prayer should be more biased," he joked.

To be sure, the Ramblers (15-15) have had a rough year, with injuries sidelining some of their best players. The team started three freshmen, a sophomore and a senior Saturday.

"We need a good prayer tonight," assistant coach Rick Malnati requested before the game.

"A short one," Schmidt replied.

"Short, but powerful," Malnati said.

With five minutes until game time, Schmidt stood at the microphone to recite the opening prayer.

"We ask you, Lord, to look favorably on our Ramblers," she said. "May we play with our hearts, our minds, our bodies, remembering to be alert with our eyes on the ball."

With the prayer over, the student section, known as the Rowdies, started chanting: "Sis-ter Jean. Sis-ter Jean. Sis-ter Jean."

She turned to them, smiled and gave a thumbs up. Then she took her seat to watch the game.

As affable as she is before the game, she is mostly silent during it. She sits with her hands folded in her lap, twiddling her thumbs.

She clapped when the Ramblers scored and groaned when they couldn't get a shot off on time. "Oh, Jordan," she said when senior standout Jordan Hicks made a foul. "C'mon, Ben," she said when captain Ben Averkamp readied for a free throw.

But there's no loud cheering or booing from Sister Jean. And of course, there's no cursing when things go wrong. Sometimes she prays silently — "in my heart," she says — that nobody gets hurt.

With two minutes left on the clock, and the Ramblers ahead by 20, Schmidt left her seat and watched the final minutes from the tunnel. At the buzzer, she gave two thumbs up and hugged the players as they headed to the locker room.
"The pregame prayer was a good luck charm," Hicks said to Schmidt at a postgame party. "You were on your game."

"I can pray. You can work," Schmidt said.

And with that, the team's regular season — and final home game — was over. "See you next season," she said as she left the arena.

Back at Regis Hall, where she lives in a suite, she sat down at her desk and typed her postgame email to coach Moser.

_I know we will continue our hard work, our playing to the end of the game and the sharing of the ball on the court. I believe that we can come out #1 in the league if we put our whole being into each game._

_Yes, it is one game at a time and each is a different game, and performances are spread differently. May God watch over our men and keep them healthy and WINNING._

_Good luck and GO RAMBLERS._

_Sr. Jean._