

**Youth Sports Opportunity in the Central Montcalm Community:**

**The Junior Hornet Program**

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**A32668357**

**12-4-11**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explains the format of a new youth sports program I intend to begin in my school district, Central Montcalm. The goal of this Junior Hornet program is to teach youth basketball fundamentals while at the same time teaching character development traits. This program will be run for children who are in grades three through six (inclusive). Central Montcalm is an economically disadvantaged community in which approximately 70% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The intent of the program is to help all Central Montcalm students become better citizens through participation in the program. The structure of this organization is setup as a feeder program for the middle and high school boys' and girls' basketball programs. The emphasis for Junior Hornet members will not be on winning basketball games, but it will instead, have an emphasis on building better members of our community.

## **Youth Sports Opportunity in the Central Montcalm Community: The Junior Hornet Program**

As the boys' junior varsity basketball coach at Central Montcalm High School I feel that it is imperative to have continuity throughout our basketball program. I feel that this continuity will not only help to develop better basketball players, but also help these young men develop good character. To help prepare our middle school and high school players to become successful young men both on and off the basketball court I am implementing a youth program that reflects the value of what we are trying to teach all young men in the basketball/athletic program. In my attempt to teach life skills to our young men, I will be starting the Junior Hornet Basketball Program.

This program is designed for boys residing in the Central Montcalm (CM) school district who are in third, fourth, fifth, or sixth grades (inclusive). The Junior Hornet program will act as a minor league of sorts for our middle and high school basketball/athletic programs. Although only ten to fifteen players will be kept on the CM varsity squad and another fifteen or so on the junior varsity, the intention of this broader-based/no cut program is to better the lives of young men in this area by teaching them core values such as hard work, the importance of staying physically fit, and character development. Exposure to the program at a young age for these children will help them to understand the goals and expectations of Hornet basketball. It is my hope that the Junior Hornet program will help to build not only a successful basketball team, but more importantly, successful young men/women.

Participants in the Junior Hornet program will meet twice a week from the start of December through the end of February. Although this does not encompass the entire high

school season of November through March, it gives the coaching staff more time to spend with the high school teams at the beginning and at the end of the season, when the most work in a basketball season needs to be done. Wednesdays and Saturdays will be practice days for Junior Hornets, because these days will be the best available dates for our high school and middle school coaching staff to meet with all the players. Our junior varsity team typically plays on Mondays and Thursdays with the varsity usually playing on Tuesdays and Fridays. Our middle school teams (seventh and eighth grades) play on five different Saturdays in January and February. By implementing this schedule, it will give all middle/high school coaches and high school players the ability to work with the youth players. Although the middle school staff will be playing games on some of the Saturdays, they will still have many other Junior Hornet dates they should be able to attend. Practices will be scheduled on these days so that the young players can become acquainted with the coaching staff at the higher levels and the coaches can also become better acquainted with the players.

In addition to the three months of the Junior Hornet program during the winter, we will also offer a Hornet Basketball summer camp for two weeks each year in June. The camp will be scheduled Monday-Friday for the first two weeks after the school year has concluded. During this time period, the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) gives coaches a total of fifteen days to work with student-athletes in grades seven through twelve. I also plan to take the opportunity to reconnect with our Junior Hornets. These young athletes will have had a three-month break from basketball, and I believe it is important to reestablish the program during our downtime in the summer. Also, by holding the camp as soon as school has concluded, this will hopefully draw more

participants who have not yet gone to summer camp or have left on summer vacation.

Hosting a summer camp will show students that the Junior Hornet coaching staff wants to touch base with them and cares about them as people, throughout the entire year. Hellison, I believe, supports my hypothesis, in stating: "Program leaders need to really care about kids and to support them continuously (2003, p. 33)." Supporting our young Hornets year-round will help to build positive repertoire.

In addition, holding a camp at this time will allow Junior Hornet members time to play other sports such as football and baseball during basketball's offseason. This gives players an opportunity to take a break from basketball and develop other skills with different coaches. Not having young athletes specialize in just basketball helps to avoid player burnout. Gould states, "It is also argued that increased stress and burnout are associated with early single sports specialization, as well as social isolation as involvement in these programs separate the young athletes from peers and, in turn, interfere with normal identity development (2010, p. 10)." Junior Hornet members will be encouraged to participate in a variety of sports/activities throughout the year.

In offering a two-week summer camp, we will keep the student-athletes continuously thinking about basketball and their affiliation with the program, without having to burden them continuously with basketball activities. The investment being made in these young men is not something I want to occur only three months out of the year.

Practices for the winter season and the summer camp will be about ninety minutes in length. Depending on the number of participants and coaches in the program, we will run either one or two practices with the Junior Hornets. If we have high numbers of participants, it may be more feasible to have the third and fourth graders at one practice

and the fifth and sixth graders at another practice. Also, I would like to have about one coach or player volunteer for every five or six players in attendance. The smaller this ratio is, the more individual attention that can be given to our participants.

The practices will be centered upon three main objectives, the three F's: fun, fundamentals, and family. The Junior Hornet program wants its participants to enjoy what they are doing. By having fun during the practice sessions, players will want to delve further into the program. Coaches and volunteers will emphasize this concept throughout all drills and activities. Children who have fun with an activity will be more likely to come back and stay involved with the program.

Fundamentals will be something that is worked on during all practices. Learning the fundamentals of basketball will help our players to improve their skills and learn the value of hard work. Learning to correctly perform fundamentals is the cornerstone of becoming a successful basketball player. If players learn fundamentals at a young age, they can be taught the more subtle nuances of the game as they progress through the ranks. Practices will be arranged to give participants optimal opportunities to practice skills with a minimum amount of downtime. Weinberg and Gould encourage coaches to, "Keep practices active- avoid lines and standing around (2007, p. 518)." Having constant movement with these young people will capture their attention and give them more time to practice and to hone their skills.

Basketball fundamentals are not the only fundamentals that will be taught to Junior Hornets. Fundamental life skills of honesty, integrity, perseverance, etc. will also be emphasized throughout practice. In a community where 70% of kids are eligible for free/reduced lunch, many of the children in our community may not have the opportunity

to learn these vital life lessons in their homes. Just as the basketball fundamentals are essential for young people to learn to become successful players, I believe the life skills taught to these youth players is vital for their success as productive citizens. By teaching and reinforcing these core values with our players in the Junior Hornet program we will help to build better basketball players, but more importantly, we will help to build better young men.

The emphasis on fundamentals will not only benefit the youth players, but also the older players who volunteer their time will reap many valuable life lessons as well. A common saying is that to prove that you have learned something well, you should teach it to another person. Because the middle school and high school players will be assisting the coaching staff in teaching these core basketball and life fundamentals, hopefully they will be emphasizing and valuing these factors with their own lives as well. In leading by example, these older players will continue to model positive behaviors to our younger players.

Last, family will be a key component to the Junior Hornet program. Each participant needs to feel a part of Hornet basketball. Having a sense of belonging gives all children a sense of purpose and a direction. Larson and his colleagues have stated: "Research across settings substantiates the importance of opportunities to develop a sense of belonging (2004, p. 9)." All children desire acceptance into a group of their peers. As the Junior Hornets affiliate themselves with a positive program and its positive leaders and players, this sense of acceptance is likely to yield better results in the long run. I will stress with my coaches and player volunteers that every child, from the most skilled player to the least skilled player, needs to feel valued in the program. No members of the Central Montcalm

basketball program have ever made a living from the game of basketball, but the core values that can be taught in the program can be beneficial to all members of the Hornet basketball family.

The Junior Hornet program will not be grouping players based upon ability or creating travel teams. Travel teams tend to exclude participants based on financial resources or physical abilities. Having a travel team at such a young age will not encourage kids to improve on their abilities. Instead, it will make it more likely that some children will choose to discontinue their participation, if they lack the necessary athletic skills. The Junior Hornet program will emphasize the importance of improving one's own skills, not on comparing one's own skills with other children. Although competition will become a part of the practices, individual improvement will be encouraged and emphasized ahead of competition. In doing this, players will be able to focus on what they CAN do in order to become better, instead of learning from others what they CANNOT do.

A major objective of the Junior Hornet program would be to progress Junior Hornets through the basketball program, so that they will become model Hornet basketball players by the end of their high school careers. The program essentially takes young boys as third graders and provides a framework for helping them grow as people until they graduate from high school. This is a ten-year investment being made in the lives of young men. Some of those who join as third graders may choose to dropout of the program or may be cut from the program somewhere along the line, but it is the goal of the program to help all those involved to become better people. Even if some young men are cut, they can be kept as part of the program by possibly being team managers or statisticians. These opportunities will be offered to some young men, so that more students can benefit from



the program. Not every player in the program will reach the varsity level, but all participants can benefit from the life lessons learned through involvement in the program.

Coaches for this program (mostly made up of our middle and high school coaching staff members) will meet with me before the season to discuss our philosophy and expectations as a program. Coatsworth and Conroy advise, "A first step in building a strong staff is an initial screening to help ensure that those hired have the basic skills and experience needed to conduct the program and also personify the mission and values of the organization. Staff behavior that is counter to the program's values and goals will undermine the lessons being taught to the youth (2007, p. 66)." Without everyone being on the same page, players will not have consistency, which is necessary from the coaches. In order to do what is best for our Junior Hornets, coaches need to collaborate with one another and have common core goals for athletes in the program.

Player volunteers will be older students in the program between seventh grade and twelfth grade (inclusive). Before being allowed to work as volunteers for their younger peers, these young men will be required to attend workshops, which will cover the philosophy and expectations of the program. Although utilizing the help of high school players can be a major addition to the program, it is important that the high school students also know what we are trying to accomplish. I believe that giving this experience to our older youth will give them a chance to interact with other community members. Dworkin and Bremer echo my thinking by stating, "Beneficial youth activities provide a unique opportunity for youth to acquire social capital by interacting with effective adult leaders and supportive community members (2004, p. 16)"

I believe by utilizing the older peers to help the younger students, there will be a great deal of continuity in the program. Many younger children admire older students, and this program would serve as a bridge to bring these age groups together. This program will bring all facets of Central Montcalm basketball together as one cohesive unit: younger players, older players, and coaches. Not only will this program be helpful to the youngest members of the program, I believe it will also be beneficial for the older players.

The seventh through twelfth graders will serve as role models to the younger players. The program will begin with mostly adult coaches leading exercises, but the goal will be to shift these responsibilities to high school volunteers. Hellison states the goal is to have, "The responsibility for planning and carrying out the program gradually shifts from the program leader to the kids (2003, p. 36)." With the participation of these older student-athletes, it will also give them some ownership of the program and it will assist them in developing their own leadership skills and styles.

It is a program expectation that all members of the CM boys' basketball program are to be seen doing positive things in the community. The coaching staff wants to see the players positively involved in the community. Junior Hornets will be invited to attend varsity basketball games and perhaps to even display their skills during the halftime of some of these games. This opportunity to showcase the Junior Hornet program also helps to build a sense of community. Parents will see both the present and future of CM basketball, and community members will understand that the goal of the program is to reach all ages and levels. The community will have proof that the basketball program is a valued part of the CM athletic program.

I think it is important to get parents involved with the Junior Hornet program. Although interactions with parents can be one of the most nerve-racking times for a coaching staff, having the parents buy into the program is essential to the ultimate success of the program. It is important for our coaching staff to remember that we should not see parents as the enemy, but to use them as supplements of the program. Gould notes that, "The bulk of parents we have talked with buy into the educational athletics philosophy and want to support their coach and athletes in positive ways. In fact, research shows that parents are absolutely essential for helping young athletes develop (2006, p. 6)."

At the beginning of each winter season, we will conduct a parents' meeting to discuss with parents the goals for the program and how they can help us in achieving those goals. Letting parents know we need their support in teaching their children will help to give parents a sense of ownership in the Junior Hornet program. During that meeting, we will cover the mission statement of the program (see p. 20-21). It is important to always remember that youth athletes rely entirely on their parents to get them to and from practices. Without the support of parents, we will not be able to have kids in the program.

Although I am somewhat weary of having parents be volunteer coaches, their participation and assistance can have a positive impact on the program. Parents will be steered away from the coaching aspect of the program. Often, whether intentionally done or not, parents are more concerned with their athlete instead of all athletes within the program. In addition, having a parent as a coach can be very difficult for an athlete. The Junior Hornet Coaching Staff may consist of some parent volunteers, but a careful screening process will be implemented. An example of a parent who would be a good fit for the Junior Hornet program as a coach is a parent who is fully invested in the program,

regardless of his/her child's status, and a parent who is willing to go through the prescribed training. Once the total number of participants is known, the coaching staff will determine how many coaches are needed in the program. It is unlikely that we will need any parent coaches, but if we do, there will be a limited amount.

Most parents, who wish to help out in the program as coaches, will be steered in other directions. Instead of having parents focused directly on the coaching aspect, I would prefer them to help in other ways. Parents willing to dedicate their time may be given jobs such as fundraising, concessions at middle and high school games, sorting out t-shirts, etc. Parents can be a valuable resource for any program; however, they must be utilized in a constructive and beneficial way. If parents learn the boundaries of the basketball coaching staff early on, they will be less likely to become problematic as their children advance through the program. Most parents who want to become part of the program are doing so for positive reasons, and the coaching staff will find ways in which they can help. After all, "Child and adolescent well-being requires the engagement and participation of multiple community forces and sectors (Benson et al., 1998, p. 139)."

Before any parents are allowed to become directly involved with the program they will be required to pass a criminal background check. Although this may seem tedious and unnecessary in a small rural community such as Central Montcalm, you can never be too careful. Recent examples such as the Pennsylvania State University football sexual abuse scandal are reminders of the importance of keeping a close eye on personnel who work with minors, such as coaches and administrators within the program. All members of our coaching staff have to go through these background checks; therefore, the same will be true for our parent volunteers. This may be a financial hassle for some parents wishing to

participate in the program, but when the well being of children is on the line, one can never be too cautious. It is important for children in the program to feel safe, and also for all children to have an opportunity to grow in this program.

Being that I am involved with the boys' basketball program, I have designed the Junior Hornet program for young boys; however, I feel this program could be beneficial for all children. Before implementing this program, I will schedule a meeting with members of the girls' basketball coaching staff and ask them if they want their athletes to be included in the program as well. Since the inception of Title IX, I feel it is essential to provide these opportunities to young women in the community as well. The goals of the Junior Hornet program are universally beneficial to members of either gender, and although I coach boys, I want to give this opportunity to more children in our community.

If the girls' basketball coaching staff agrees to take part in the Junior Hornet program, it would be ideal. With more of the school district invested in the same outcome, the impact of the Hornet program could expand even further. The girls' coaches would be welcome to make suggestions to improve the program and would be given part of the responsibility of conducting the day-to-day operations. As an entire coaching staff, it is important to be on the same page and working toward common goals. If the girls' program did invest in the Junior Hornets, they would be equal partners in building and maintaining the organization, decision-making, staffing, practice plans, and budgeting.

The cost associated with this program will be minimal for parents and players. This fact will encourage as many young people as possible to participate. The Central Montcalm community is one of the poorest areas in Michigan. As stated earlier, roughly seventy percent of our student population receives free/reduced lunch. Statewide, Montcalm

County is second only to Wayne County in the percentage of the county population that is dependent on welfare. Because of the economic challenges of our community, it is essential to keep cost for parents and players at a minimum. Keeping cost low will help more young people to become involved in the program.

A small fee, probably between \$25-50 will cover the cost of students in the program. Although ideally I would like to make the program available with no cost, in order for each child to have a basketball, there will be a nominal fee. The cost for the participants will go toward a youth size basketball for each player along with a t-shirt/jersey, which displays the Hornet basketball logo. If funds allow (via fundraisers done by the program), I will try to offer scholarships to those students who are unable to pay the fee. Also, despite a high poverty level, there are several affluent members of the community who have donated money to the CM athletic program in previous years. If we received money from donors, this would also go to help children who are unable to pay the cost. The cost will also help to dissuade parents simply looking for a temporary babysitter for their children.

The cost of the program will be kept low for participants, because the cost to run the program should be very minimal. The fee of \$25-50 would offset much of the cost for the t-shirt/jersey, and youth size basketball. There will be no need for registered or paid officials since there will be no sanctioned games. Scheduling games for children this young I believe is dangerous, because the emphasis placed on skill development may come as an opportunity cost of winning. The purpose of the Junior Hornet program will be to allow players to sharpen their fundamental skills, not to win basketball games. Petipas et al. state: "Coaches and parents who place primary emphasis on external motivations such as winning, social comparison, and public recognition, can create an ego-oriented or

performance-focused environment. Coaches and parents who focus on effort, self-improvements, and intrinsic motivation create a task-oriented or mastery climate (2005, p. 65).” Players will have opportunities to scrimmage one another, so they can gain experience with game-like situations, but there will be no official games. During scrimmages, no score will be kept. Emphasizing the FUN aspect of the game should help to keep more children involved with the program.

Although, I do believe those involved in sports should learn how to win and lose gracefully, I don’t feel the added pressure of a scoreboard is needed for children in grades 3-6. In seventh grade, paid coaches are hired to coach players and registered MHSAA officials are hired to officiate games. As students progress, more emphasis is placed on winning. If Junior Hornet members stay with the program and are able to make the seventh grade team, they will gain this experience.

Coaches/student-volunteers can officiate the scrimmages. This is a valuable experience for coaches and student-volunteers to better understand the perspective of an official. Officiating basketball can be an extremely difficult job, and by experiencing this players and coaches can develop more empathy for the job given to referees. The monetary cost of officials will be zero, but the experience gained by the members of our coaching staff and our older players will be extremely valuable.

Like officiating, the Junior Hornet program will not have any cost for use of facilities. The Central Montcalm High School gym has three regulation size courts with a total of twelve baskets. Our Middle School is attached to the high school and has another full size court along with six total hoops. Both of these facilities can be reserved at no cost, as long as they are reserved well in advance. The advantage of using the school facilities is not just

monetary. By practicing in the middle and high school gymnasiums, our Junior Hornets will become familiar with the environment they may be playing in someday.

Transportation will not be an issue for the Junior Hornet budget. The program will not have to transport players to and from practice, as this will be the responsibility of parents and other adults. Also, since we will not be playing teams from local schools, there will be no need to have transportation to and from games. Thus, the cost of transportation for the program will be zero.

The only foreseeable problem with transportation could be children whose parents cannot afford to get them to or from practice. Because the program will be run in the winter, and many of our students live on rural dirt roads, we will have to make preemptive judgments regarding potentially dangerous weather conditions with snow and ice. By communicating online via emails and updates on my [www.twitter.com/coachbasom](http://www.twitter.com/coachbasom) webpage, we will have a procedure for alerting parents of cancellations/postponements due to inclement weather. Parents of Junior Hornets will be given my personal cell phone number and my school phone number to make certain that there is open communication. This is important to ensure the safety of all Junior Hornets

The only major “cost” for the Junior Hornet program is not monetary at all. The creation and maintaining of this program will require a significant amount of time from the coaching staff. Despite only a three-hour obligation each week for three months, this can still be a significant demand on time. In order to have a successful program, it will take the dedication of several coaches. Coordinating and running this would be a daunting task for just one person. By delegating responsibility to others, the task will become more manageable.



The biggest time commitment required to orchestrate this program will be during the first year. Whenever people are doing something for the first time, it always takes a little longer to facilitate and make necessary adjustments. Organizing practices and training coaches and student-volunteers is time consuming, and it will require a great deal of patience. Any coach at the high school level could tell you that sometimes we work for very little dollars per work hour; yet, the Junior Hornet program is an investment into the lives of young men in our community. I believe the benefits far outweigh the costs.

The cost for the summer camp will also be minimal. The estimated cost for summer camp would be \$10-25 per student. The cost will depend upon if the child needs a basketball, or has one from the winter season. All campers will receive a camp T-shirt. Our coaching staff will direct this camp with the assistance of some of our high school players. Since we will be meeting with our players in grades seven through twelve during these two weeks for the fifteen days permitted by the MHSAA, it should be easy to coordinate a schedule that allows for the high school players to serve as counselors during our camp. Camps will be evaluated at the end of each year to determine possible changes/adaptations for the following year.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this program several steps will be taken. First, at the conclusion of each season both participants and their parents will be given anonymous surveys about their thoughts on the program. As a coach and administrator of the program it can be difficult for me to see the program from a variety of perspectives. Using exit surveys at the conclusion of each season and summer camp session will help me to better gauge the programs' strengths and weaknesses. Being able to ask your consumers about your product is an important step in creating a lasting and successful program. Mitra

cites, “The importance of learning from student voices stems from the belief that students themselves are often neglected sources of useful information (2006, p. 8).” It would be a mistake not to ask those who experience the program about their thoughts.

Another strategy would be tracking the progress of Junior Hornets from year-to-year. The tracking will allow us to see if the program helped to sustain success after the participants move on to the middle school and high school teams. If the Junior Hornet program turns out middle and high school players who are upstanding citizens and competitive basketball players, this would be a sign of the program’s success. Conversely, if the middle and high school players lacked in areas of honesty, integrity, perseverance, etc. this would reveal that the program needs to be altered.

In order for this program to be sustained over time, it will take commitment from coaches, players, and parents. Before implementing the program it will be crucial to meet with other coaches and volunteers to discuss the details of how the program will be run. If parents and players are to buy-in, it will require a great deal of preparation on the part of the coaching staff. Laying a good foundation is an important factor in constructing a house that can weather the years. Laying a solid foundation for the Junior Hornet program is imperative to its future success as well.

The true value of this program may not be known for years down the road. Michigan State University Head Men’s Basketball Coach Tom Izzo cites that the best part of his job is the players who come back. They come to visit Izzo and the current players as a way of giving back and showing support to the program. Many of Izzo’s former players come back for reunions each year, because of the impact that Coach Izzo and the MSU basketball program has had on their lives. Izzo may not see the results immediately, but

the responses he gets from former players later in their lives shows the impact he has had on them. Football coach Amos Alonzo Stagg also believed, "Changing lives matters most (Gould {Wooden article}, 2006, p. 7)."

It is my hope to be able to build these types of relationships with players in the CM basketball program. No Hornet basketball player has ever made a living playing basketball in the almost fifty-year history of the school. However, countless former players, such as myself, have learned valuable lessons through participation in CM basketball. The purpose of the Junior Hornet program is to give this experience to future generations of CM youngsters in hopes that they will benefit from the program in the same way. Perhaps there is no single way to evaluate the effectiveness of the Junior Hornet program. However, if the program has the same effects for future generations of young men that it had on me, the time invested in the Junior Hornet program is well worth it.

**Central Montcalm Hornet Basketball Mission Statement:****“ A Central Montcalm Basketball Player is...”**

A Central Montcalm basketball player is a model citizen in his community. He is quick to help a fellow student or teammate. He is a role model to his peers. He is never found in the principal's office for discipline problems, instead he works to promote a positive school environment. He conducts himself appropriately inside the school and outside in the community.

A Central Montcalm basketball player is a role model for younger players. He volunteers to help with the youth programs. He realizes that the program is bigger than himself, and he feels it is important to give back in an effort to help future generations of Hornets. He provides a good role model to impressionable young fans watching the game by always treating his opponents, teammates, coaches, fans and officials with the utmost respect. He knows the uniform he wears symbolizes nearly fifty years of Hornet basketball, and that he represents hundreds of former players every time he steps out onto the floor. He honors these players by competing from tipoff until the final whistle.

A Central Montcalm basketball player realizes it takes considerable work to achieve greatness. He constantly works on his craft in an effort to improve his skills. He practices during the offseason to work on

fundamentals as well as improving his strength and conditioning. He realizes the importance of individual skill development for the betterment of the team.

A Central Montcalm basketball player is always more concerned about the team than himself. He thinks about what he can do for the team instead of what the team can do for him. He doesn't worry about his playing time, instead he focuses on putting forth his best effort. He strives for team accolades ahead of personal statistics. His enthusiasm is contagious. A Central Montcalm basketball player enjoys getting an assist more than he enjoys scoring a basket.

A Central Montcalm basketball player is a true student-athlete. He realizes that academics are more important than athletics. He is conscientious about his studies and does not accept failing grades on any assignments. He encourages his teammates to take this same approach in the classroom. He knows that his studies will take him further than his basketball skills.

-Coach Basom 2011

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