

# Put your gifts to work

By AGNUS BERENATO

"What you are is God's gift to you. What you make of yourself is your gift to God."

When I was in the seventh grade playing basketball for St. Mary's CYO in Gloucester, N.J., our moderator, Sister Marylyn, gave me this quote. I have remembered it ever since and often repeat it to my student athletes now.

Each and every one of us has a great opportunity to excel physically, mentally and spiritually because we have all been given the tools to be successful. Some people, as I say, are more blessed than others, but we all have gifts to share.

For me, my gift was a great work ethic and desire to be the best I could be. Growing up tall in a family of 10, sports was not an option. Basketball was what I did from sixth grade until ... well, I'm still doing it. For me, playing sports — field hockey, softball and trying lacrosse along with basketball — was an opportunity to explore other venues and meet new people.

Winning was always important, and that

have great faith in my vocation as an educator and coach, and I try to instill life lessons to my student athletes. My student athletes are quicker, faster and more skilled, but they were all given a gift as well.

Every one of us can use our vocation to give back and be a witness for certain causes. I am deeply committed to breast cancer awareness and heart disease, and I believe if we are physically active our lives are less likely to be affected by either one of these medical conditions.

My father died of a heart attack when I was in the seventh grade, and he was the main reason my sisters and I played basketball. He put a concrete slab in our yard with a hoop and said he wanted us home and outside playing ball. It was a great move

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started in CYO and continued with state titles in high school, but winning wasn't the only thing. I felt good when I competed. I felt strong when I competed. I was mentally tougher than others when I competed. I was a team player when I competed. I was sad when I lost and happy when I won.

Physically, basketball allowed my acceptance and kept me in shape. Mentally, basketball gave me confidence and taught me to make quick decisions and be accountable. A missed rebound or layup could cost us a championship, but a made free throw or great pass also could mean a championship. Spiritually, basketball has made me the person I am today.

I have learned to have blind faith in my team, my staff and my support system. As a player in grammar school, high school and college, I always planned Mass before every game for the team. I really believe I must give back my gift to God, so I must ask for his blessing and grace as our team takes the court.

Growing up playing basketball was more than just something I did; it was everything to me. I

on his part because we were the neighborhood "hot spot." He never lived to see his kids grow up, but maybe if his dad encouraged him to be physically fit he would have lived longer.

My mom died of breast cancer 25 years ago. She was not physically fit but was instead mentally and spiritually fit. She taught us to have blind faith in all things, and only one person will win the prize at the end of the race.

I recently received a card from my high school teacher/role model Jack McEntee, and on the cover it read: "The years teach much which the days never knew," a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson.

After all these years, I look back and realize I am exactly where I started in 1968 as a sixth-grader on St. Mary's CYO Team. Recently at Villanova, more than 300 kids, parents and grandparents came to play in a CYO battle, St. Mary's vs. Brooklawn (boys and girls team),

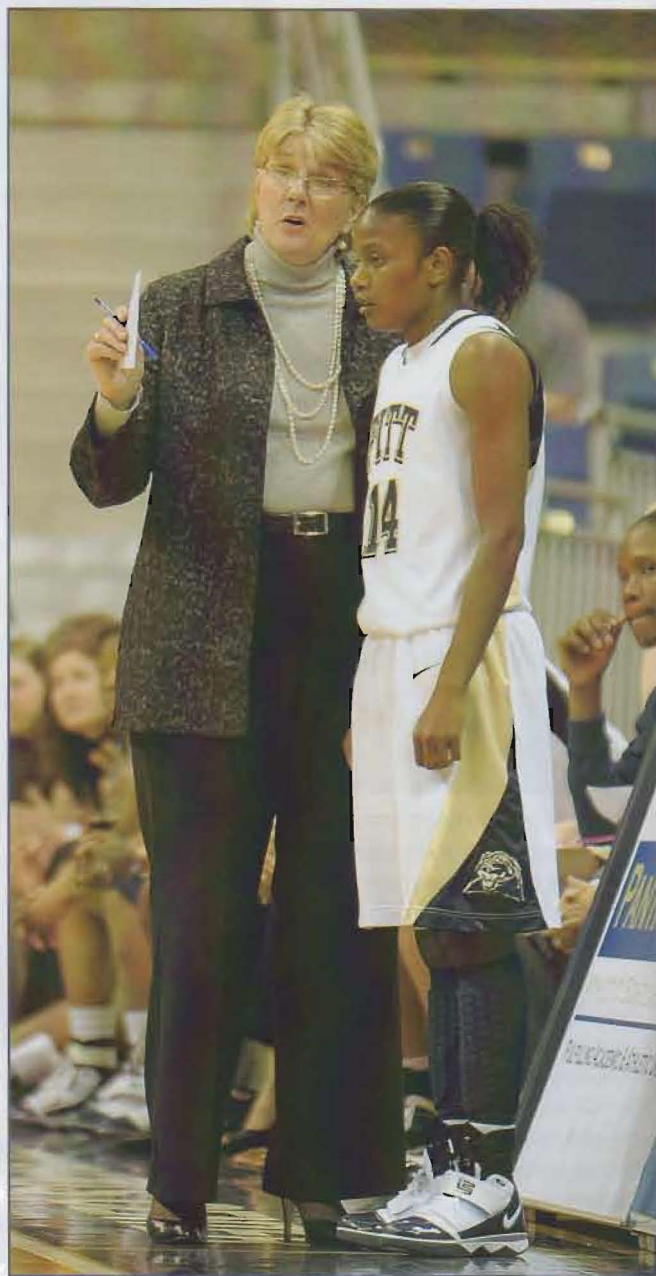


Photo courtesy of University of Pittsburgh Athletics  
Pitt head women's coach Agnus Berenato gives advice to guard Jania Sims during a recent game.

before my game. When the CYO games were over, I spoke to them all about being focused on school, saying "please" and "thank you" and following their dreams.

We all have a gift that God has given us. We must remember to give it back. In the crowd there were friends of my parents, and classmates and my classmates' kids who now play basketball. The days cannot tell me of our power to influence, but surely the years do.

Berenato is the head women's basketball coach at the University of Pittsburgh.