

## Cover Stories | Crofton &amp; Wynot Girls' Basketball Teams

# Hoops Highway

A 17-Mile Stretch Of Nebraska Highway 12 Separates Two Of The Top Small-School Girls' Basketball Programs In The Upper Midwest. In The Past Nine Years, Crofton Has Won Five State Titles, Including The Last Two, And Earned Eight Top-Three Finishes. Wynot Has Earned Three Straight Titles And Four In The Past Eight Years. Both Have High Expectations Again In 2013-14.



JAMES D. CIMBUREK/P&D  
The 2013-14 Crofton girls' basketball team poses with the five state championship trophies won under head coach Aaron Losing, back right. The Warriors are looking for a third straight Class C2 title.

## Warriors Maintaining High Expectations

BY JAMES D. CIMBUREK  
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CROFTON, Neb. — One of the truths of sports is that achieving greatness is tough, maintaining it is even tougher.

And that is exactly what has happened for Aaron Losing and the Crofton girls' basketball team.

The Warriors, with victories in their first two games of 2013-14 (prior to their Dec. 10 game with Boone Central-Newman Grove), have won 36 consecutive games, dating back to their 2011 title run and including their unbeaten 2012-13 season. Under Losing, Crofton has advanced to state eight times in nine seasons, winning five championships. The Warriors also have a runner-up finish and two third place finishes during that run.

The "down" year during that run — 17-4 in 2009-10.

Losing took over the Crofton program in 2004-05 from fellow Mount Marty College alum and former baseball teammate Travis Thompson, who guided the Warriors to a 17-3 season the previous year.

"I had good senior leadership when I got here," Losing said. "Travis had done a very good job before I ever showed up. They were ready from the get-go to have success."

And that they did, winning titles in his first three seasons at the helm.

"We always had good athletes," said Amber Hegge, a key member of those first three championships under Losing. Hegge went on to play at the University of South Dakota and is now playing professionally in Australia. "Losing is a great coach and did a lot for us."

As each group of seniors moved through the Crofton program, it seemed the next group was ready to lead when their time came, Losing said.

"We've always had seniors

willing to set the right example, willing to hold the younger kids accountable for putting in the practice time," he said. "This summer was a prime example of that. The summer is where a lot of improvement happens."

This year that mantle has fallen on two seniors, guards Alex Allen and Amy Mueller. Allen said that the Warrior way to success isn't that complicated.

"The main thing is a lot of hard work and dedication," she said. "Every open gym, every team camp, every practice we know we have to work."

That dedication doesn't reside on the basketball court alone.

"Out of this group, all 20 did track last spring," Losing said. "All 20 did either cross country or volleyball this fall."

CHS has found success in those sports as well. Crofton won its eighth straight cross country title, with junior forward Quinn Wragge leading the way. Juniors Allison Arens and Maria Wortmann were among the leaders for a volleyball program that advanced to state for the first time in 20 years. CHS also placed third in last spring's state track meet.

"They're around each other year round, from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31," Losing said. "They hang around each other, and make bonds and friendships while they're doing that."

Wragge, who moved to Crofton her sophomore year, said that the connections both within the team and within the community have been great.

"It's different from other places," she said. "Every girl wants everyone to be better, they push everyone else to become better."

Part of the connection within the team has to do

with family. Names like Tramp, Steffen, Arens, Guenther and Wortmann — all of which are on this year's roster — have been dotting CHS rosters for years, including several that were part of earlier Warrior championships.

"There's a long list of names whose sisters or cousins played for us when they were younger," Losing said.

One of those was Allison Arens, whose sister Bridget was a standout on last year's unbeaten team and is now playing for the University of South Dakota.

"I had my older sister and a bunch of older cousins play here," she said. "When they made it to state, we got the mindset about where we wanted to go when we got to (high school basketball)."

Families play a key role in the success of the program, Losing said.

"We talk to the parents each year, and tell them that the team is a triangle: parents, players and coaches," he said. "A perfect example of that is Art Sufficool. He's at almost every game. And a lot of the community is like Art, good examples of what our community stands for."

That "community" connection resides between Losing and his players as well.

"When I was home in August, Losing still had all our senior pictures up from the last nine years," Hegge said.

While the goal for the season is to add a third straight championship, that is not the immediate focus.

"I'm focused on the next game, not games in March," she said. "Everyone's pretty good at taking it one game at a time."

You can follow James D. Cimburek on Twitter at [twitter.com/JCimburek](https://twitter.com/JCimburek). Discuss this story at [www.yankton.net](http://www.yankton.net)

## Wynot Reloads After Third Straight Title

BY JEREMY HOECK  
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WYNOT, Neb. — In a sport like football, the task of replacing eight seniors is not usually a daunting challenge. Back-ups can move up to increased roles the following season.

Basketball, on the other hand, is a whole different animal. Your numbers are significantly smaller and with only five players on the court, losing eight to graduation can naturally lead to a "rebuilding" year.

That is not the case in Wynot, Neb.

Not in a small town with a population of 166 and a high school with an enrollment of 37 — the 11th smallest school in the state.

Especially not when the girls' basketball team boasts a 101-10 record over the past four years with three consecutive state Class D2 championships. For good measure, in that other year (2009-10), the Lady Blue Devils lost in the state title game.

Put another way, says athletic director and head girls' coach Steve Wieseler: Tradition never graduates. Past success motivates the next crop of players to want to continue that trend, right? "I hope so," Wieseler said during a sit-down interview at Wynot High School.

"Every year is a new team, especially this year, but we'd like to think tradition will keep them committed and dedicated."

A key reason why Wynot has consistently been able to

restock the shelves (including this year when it has only 12 players, with only one returning starter) has been its commitment to start young.

Chief among those efforts is the Wynot Junior Basketball League (WJBL), which brings together players in grades 3-6 on Saturday mornings. The varsity players also serve as coaches for what is essentially a feeder program to the older ranks.

From there, the varsity program — which also includes eighth-year assistant Mark Jackson and fourth-year assistant Heidi Magorian — eventually has a handful of younger players serve as student managers.

Senior Maggie Schulte was once a student manager, watching as the Lady Blue Devils eventually reached the state tournament by her eighth grade year (2009-10) — finishing 25-1 and losing in the state title game.

"It all starts with the student managers, that's how you get your first taste," said Schulte, a Wayne State College recruit. "When we won a couple titles, they were on the bench."

"They're with us all the time."

Though those younger managers aren't actually running through drills, they're clearly part of the process — consistently taking notes, keeping score and setting up drills, according to senior Brittany Bruening.

"Our managers are really involved," said Bruening, a second-year transfer from Newcastle. "Having them par-

ticipate, they feel part of the team."

From that point, it's cyclical for Wynot.

And understandably a model that other programs try to emulate.

"He started a program that develops young; that gets good participation with a small school," said Osmond girls' coach Michael Brown, whose Tigers lost to Wynot in last season's D2 title game in Lincoln.

"We're working toward the same thing here, where we can start at the third and fourth grade level, to make sure you always have kids on the way up."

Once those players reach the varsity, they are instantly welcomed to Wynot's other notable feature: Its full-court pressure defense, with different variations on zones and traps.

"We pride ourselves with our defense," Schulte said. "Coach always says that defense will lead to offense."

"The first couple weeks of practice, it seemed like we almost didn't even practice offense at all. We wanted to get our presses down."

Even as complicated as the presses seem, it didn't take long for someone new like Bruening to figure it out, she said.

"It took me a while, but not as long as I thought," said Bruening, who came to Wynot before her junior year after Newcastle discontinued its athletic programs. She says she chose Wynot over Ponca.

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JEREMY HOECK/P&D  
Wynot Blue Devils players talk during a break in practice earlier this season. Despite graduating eight seniors and having just 12 girls out, Wynot is hoping to continue its run of success.

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