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O'Leary tops in Big Eight

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 By John Barry
 Gazette staff

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A bright future got even brighter Wednesday for Catie O'Leary.

The Janesville Parker High School sophomore was named the Big Eight Conference's Player of the Year in girls basketball.

O'Leary highlights a first team that also includes Janesville Craig junior guard Kristy Benson, along with Madison Memorial senior Justine Hayes, the 2006 Player of the Year. Rounding out the first team are Madison West sophomore Ellie Pearson and Middleton senior Diana Bruns.

Hayes, a Cleveland State recruit, is the only repeater on the first team.

Parker junior Kim Rickels and Craig junior Emily Hillison are on the second team. Parker junior Alex Klawitter and Craig junior Danielle Straw have received honorable mention.

The 5-foot-9 O'Leary led Parker to its third straight Big Eight championship and a No. 5 ranking in Division 1 in the final Associated Press regular season poll. The Vikings, behind 21 points from O'Leary, earned a tie with Middleton for the conference title by defeating the Cardinals, 48-43, in a regular-season finale.

Sparked by O'Leary's 17.2 scoring average, Parker advanced to the WIAA Division 1 sectional semifinals before losing to Waterford.

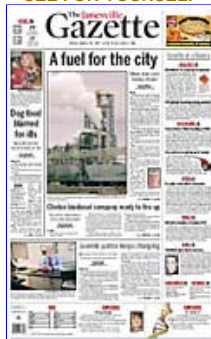
"She's a great player and deserves the award," Craig coach Mark Marsden said of O'Leary. "I knew it would be close between O'Leary and Hayes for Player of the Year, but I felt Catie was a lot more valuable to her team.

"You take O'Leary out of Parker's lineup, and they're a much different team. You take Hayes out of Memorial's lineup, and the difference isn't as great."

O'Leary had a season-high 29 points in a 63-62, double overtime win over Sun Prairie, and she finished the season with

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43 three-point goals. In becoming the first Parker player to win the award since Becky Smith in 2005, O'Leary will spearhead a 2007-08 team that will return four starters.

"Hopefully, this award is a springboard for Catie to continue working hard on her game and becoming the best player that she can," Parker coach Tom Klawitter said. "It's quite an honor for a sophomore, and it says a lot about her contributions to the team.

"As her all-around game develops, she's going to get even better. She's starting to understand that what you do on the defensive end is just as important as the offensive end."


Benson led Craig's 15-7 team in scoring, rebounding and assists. The 5-7 point guard delivered numerous clutch shots, including the game-winning basket in a thrilling 55-54 overtime win over Middleton in the second-to-last Big Eight game, which denied the Cardinals the undisputed title.

"Kristy has worked hard in becoming a very good basketball player for us," Marsden said. "She's got a knack for being around the ball, and has really developed a move to the basket that is tough to stop.

"She'll be our leader on the floor again next year, and it's nice to know I don't have to try and replace her," Marsden said. "That would've been tough."

Rickels led Parker in rebounding in moving up from honorable mention a year ago, while Hillison was Craig's top three-point shooter.

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