

Manasquan athlete places friendship with opposing player over celebration after championship win

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Griffin Linstra had every reason to bask in personal glory in the moments after his Manasquan boys basketball team staged a massive late-game comeback to defeat Rumson-Fair Haven, 36-30, in the championship game of the NJSIAA Central Jersey, Group 2 tournament on March 1.

But on the simplest level, that's not at all what Linstra, a junior guard/forward, is about. Which is why when he could have been part of a boisterous celebration that was happening amongst his teammates, he instead chose to run over to the opposite end of the court to embrace a heartbroken friend who happens to play for Rumson-Fair Haven.

After such an exciting and intense game contested in a sold-out gym between rival schools, it was a moment worthy of a salute as part of the NJSIAA Sportsmanship Series, presented by JAG Physical Therapy.

Linstra and Rumson-Fair Haven player David Carr, also a junior guard, have known each other since fourth grade, when they became travel basketball teammates. They've been good friends ever since, and communicate regularly. That included the 48 hours leading into the game, when the matchup between third-seeded Rumson-Fair Haven and top seeded Manasquan became a reality.



David Carr with the ball earlier in the state tournament for Rumson-Fair Haven.

Photo credit:
Tanya Breen/Asbury Park Press



PRESENTED BY



Griffin Linstra

"I've known him a long time," Linstra said. "Once we knew we'd be playing, we each said 'See you on Friday night,' and we knew it was going to be a lot of fun."

The game, played at a loud gym in Manasquan, was pressure-packed from first moment to the last. Don't be fooled by the final score. Every possession was defended aggressively, and every point was especially earned.

"The atmosphere of the game was crazy," Carr said. "I've never been in that loud of a gym. I had a lot of fun in that game, especially playing it against Griffin. Both student sections were off the charts and it made the game more intense. It was by far the most intense game I've ever been in and I'll always remember the game for that."

The game from Linstra's perspective was especially pressurized.

His role this year has changed. Last year, he was more of a steady contributor. But after one player transferred and another was injured, he became the player that facilitates the offense, and other teams have defended him accordingly. He went into the game averaging around 17 points, facing just about every type of defense.

Rumson-Fair Haven, however, threw something at Linstra which he's rarely seen. From the opening tip, he was face guarded by defender Riley Gill, who did a great job of it before fouling out with a few minutes left. That type of a coverage can be frustrating for any player, especially in a sectional final, and especially when Rumson-Fair Haven opened an 8-0 lead over the first few minutes.

"We've seen a lot of defenses," Linstra said. "That was probably the second time I've been face guarded. It can be frustrating, but it also opens your teammates."

"It's a little annoying, and falling behind 8-0 at home is not what you want in a state championship game, but we had a lot of resilience," he added.

Linstra stayed composed after being forced to adapt as best he could. But the defense had limited his output, a prime reason why Rumson-Fair Haven had never trailed while building a lead that had stretched to 30-23 with around two minutes left.

That's when almost out of nowhere, everything turned. Linstra helped fuel a massive 13-0 surge by his team that resulted in the comeback win. He scored eight of his 12 points in the fourth quarter, including a series of free throws to close out the victory after his assist led to the go-ahead basket.

"It was tough," he said of the game's first 30 minutes. "It was getting late, and looking dim, but it worked out."

The emotion of the comeback enveloped the gym, and when the final buzzer sounded, the Manasquan players and fans were elated, while the Rumson-Fair Haven side was stunned.

Linstra initially swarmed his teammates, but quickly thought better of it. To be more precise, he was thinking about how his friend had to crestfallen. So he ran over to Carr, who was standing in front of the Rumson-Fair Haven bench, and gave his friend a much-appreciated embrace.

One of the reasons was because he knew how it felt to be on the losing end. Linstra is an also a talented soccer player, and in November, his Manasquan team surrendered a late goal in a 1-0 loss to Holmdel in the Central Jersey, Group 2 final.

"I lost a state championship in the fall to Holmdel and I know how bad that feeling is," he said. "I know that David Carr would do the same thing for me, he's one of my really good friends. I think I saw him out of the



David Carr (front row, second from left) and Griffin Linstra (back right) have played basketball together since fourth grade.

Photo courtesy of David Carr.

corner of my eye, and I remembered that feeling of Holmdel, I didn't want him to feel that."

For Carr, the gesture meant a great deal.

"Griffin coming up to me after the game was by far the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," he said. "Griffin could've gone and celebrated with his team and the fans but he chose to come up to me and cheer me up. But I wouldn't expect anything else out of him. Griffin has always been a great person and will be his whole life. He works out young kids for basketball and is always doing the right thing.

"When he came up to me, giving me a hug saying, 'Good job, I'm very proud of you and how you've been playing this season,' it made me feel a lot better in a rough time," Carr said.

According to Manasquan coach Andrew Bilodeau, the action by Linstra fully represented the character his athlete shows on a daily basis.

"That's the kid that he is," Bilodeau said. "What's really interesting for him is that two of our better players, one left to transfer and another left to injury, so to speak, and it dramatically changed Griffin's role. He went from being a support player offensively and a defensive star to becoming a focal point offensively. It's been quite an adjustment for him, but he's done a marvelous job. And what he did after the game was definitely something we need to see more of in athletics."

The post-game moment also illustrated the importance of sportsmanship to both players.

"Sportsmanship is a really important thing for me," Linstra said. "Sports build your character and make you a better person. Meeting new people, and having relationships, and going through different stuff. If you feel bad, you don't want other people to feel the same way and you want to lift them up. Sports are a good way to connect with people, and build friendships that will last a long time. We'll probably have that one moment forever."

"Sportsmanship means a lot to me," Carr said. It brings out who is who. I always try to show sportsmanship and will continue to throughout my life. Griffin's sportsmanship at the end of the game was one of the best examples that I've ever seen. Sportsmanship will always have a special spot in my heart."



Manasquan's Griffin Linstra embraces Rumson-Fair Haven opponent David Carr after Manasquan's win.

Photo credit: Shore Sports Network.