

## While reaching many heights, the coach remains grounded

*'My faith is as fundamental to me as putting my feet on the floor in the morning.'*

By Linda Thomas



Seattle Storm Guard Betty Lennox listens to Coach Anne Donovan.

Jeff Reinking/WNBAE Photos/Getty Images

SEATTLE – As a teenager Anne Donovan wanted desperately to be like everyone else at Paramus Catholic High School in New Jersey.

“Growing up was very difficult,” Donovan said in an interview with The Catholic Northwest Progress. “Kids were either cruel or curious and they constantly stared and made fun of me. I didn’t fit in.”

At 6 feet 8 inches tall, Donovan never blended in with a crowd.

Today she stands alone as the first female coach to win a WNBA championship. The Seattle Storm claimed the top women’s basketball title with a victory over the Connecticut Sun earlier this month. It is the first major sports championship for a Seattle team in 25 years.

Donovan couldn’t hold back her tears as the sold out crowd at Key Arena, about 17,000 fans, cheered the Storm’s success. “It’s an incredible feat we’ve accomplished. I never dreamed I would be a part of something so special,” she said.

Although the WNBA championship is her greatest triumph as a coach, it is just another highlight on her long list of accomplishments.

As a basketball player, Donovan won high school and collegiate titles. She led the United States to Olympic gold medals in 1984 and 1988. Donovan was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in

1995. More recently, she was an assistant coach with the 2004 Olympic team which brought home a gold medal from Athens.

Along the way Donovan received prestigious awards. In high school she was crowned the national player of the year, and Sports Illustrated magazine named her one of the greatest 100 female athletes of the century.

Donovan said her most significant moment of success came when she won the Most Valuable Player award on her fifth grade Catholic Youth Organization basketball team. Holding the shiny trophy, Donovan was thrilled that for once her ability as a player was more noticeable than her height.

“That was when I realized I was something more than just a tall girl,” said Donovan. “That’s the first time I felt like I belonged.”

The first team Donovan played with was her close knit family in New Jersey. She’s the baby of the group with four older sisters and three older brothers. Her siblings ranged in height from 5 feet 11

inches to 7 feet 2 inches and all were talented basketball players.

The family's "coach" was her mother Ann Matthews, who was Anne's biggest fan. She kept scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings about her daughter. When Donovan went to Japan and Italy to play basketball after college, mom came to see her play. When Donovan participated in the Olympic Games in Korea and Los Angeles, mom was there.

But Matthews did not see her little girl become the first female coach to win a national basketball title. She died from a heart attack in January of this year.

Now that the Seattle Storm basketball season is complete, Donovan will take a short break before 2005 to reconnect with her family and grieve her mother's death.

"She remains with me in spirit," Donovan said in a quiet voice. "I think she was looking down the night we won the championship and absolutely enjoying every minute of it."

Donovan said the credit for her success as a basketball player, a coach and a spiritual person goes to her mother.

"Mom was responsible for giving us the core of our beliefs," said Donovan.. "My faith is as fundamental to me as putting my feet on the floor in the morning. It's my constant companion that gets me through hard times."

Donovan had to deal with her first "hard time" at the age of five when her father died. Her mother remarried when Donovan was 10.

If there's one lesson Donovan learned from her mother and from her own experiences, it was that you have to believe in yourself.

"Faith is a huge part of having confidence and believing in yourself," Donovan said. "My wish for every child in school is that they realize God made them the way they are for a reason. Appreciate and embrace differences and the gifts you've been given."

At the age of 42, Anne Donovan is still not like everyone else. She's a champion.