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THE LADY JAGUARS

‘It Ain’t About the Record’

At a School in Tennessee, a Basketball Team of Survivors

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“If I looked out and I could see in their eyes that they’re depressed about losing, and hated to come out here, it wouldn’t be worth it,” said Hatch, a 54-year-old lifelong resident of Huntingdon who long served as Carroll Academy’s boys and girls basketball coach, as he watched a game from the stands. “But they put it behind them quicker than anybody.”

**The Lady Jaguars, Part 1**  
Carroll Academy is a day school in Huntingdon, Tenn., operated by the Carroll County Juvenile Court and financed mostly by the state’s Department of Children’s Services. The region is beset by high unemployment, rampant prescription drug abuse and a proliferation of methamphetamine labs.

The Carroll County Juvenile Court judge, who has authority over the school, and Carroll Academy’s director gave The New York Times unrestricted access to explore the school through its girls basketball team, whose players have little experience with organized sports and myriad troubles outside of school. For this five-part series, The Times spoke with the girls, many of their parents and relatives, school administrators and coaches.

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He looked out at the girls, running up and down the court, gamely chasing a team they would never beat.

“But they got experience at it,” Hatch said.

House Arrest, and a 6-Player Team

Destiny admitted that she had smoked marijuana a couple of nights earlier. A drug bust with several older friends in a Walmart parking lot resulted in Destiny’s being sent to juvenile court last year. While she was on probation, she said, threatening text messages to another girl landed her at Carroll Academy.

Destiny bounces between homes. Her father is the youngest of 16 children in a family that has supplied top athletes to nearby Clarksburg High School for generations. He lives with his parents, works odd jobs and has never seen Destiny play, she said.

Destiny’s mother works as a nurse. She recently gave birth

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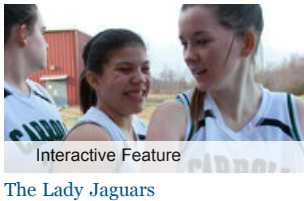
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to her fourth child from three men she had married, at least one of whom beat Destiny, Destiny’s parole officer said.

Yet Destiny does not hold a grudge. Whenever she is told that her mother is outside, waiting to give her a ride home, Destiny’s face brightens like a full moon.

Lyda Allen, Destiny’s maternal grandmother, was often the only relative of any of the nine girls cheering them from the mostly empty bleachers.

“If this place wasn’t here, God knows where she would be,” Allen said of Destiny. “I don’t know about the others, but the parents are probably the reason why most of these kids are here. But I’m not going to give up on Destiny.”

Hatch was not, either. He held Destiny’s fate. He could send her to months of drug rehabilitation at a facility far away, which would then release her back to Carroll Academy. But Destiny was a senior. When she turned 18 in June, she could walk away from school without her diploma. Further trouble after that would probably land her in jail.

Hatch quizzed her. A county parole officer tabbed to run Carroll Academy when it opened 18 years ago, he used his arsenal of knowledge, instinct and bluffs. He spoke with a serious tone and a gentle expression.

You were out with older kids, weren’t you? Yes, she said. You broke curfew, didn’t you? Yes, she admitted.

“I knew that, too,” Hatch said.

He dismissed Destiny to class, leaving her to worry what her future held.

When the team gathered that night for another game, Lutz felt a strange vibe. She asked the girls to raise their hands if they would fail a drug test. Two did: Summer, a 17-year-old senior with a baby, and Alleyah, a tiny 14-year-old eighth grader.

They were tested. The others were not.

“There ain’t no reason to lie,” said Summer, who cried because she feared being separated from her 8-month-old son, DaMarion. “They’re going to find out about it anyway.”

Summer failed. Alleyah passed. (The theory was that she either smoked synthetic marijuana, sold over the counter despite concerns about its health dangers, or unsuspectingly smoked some other herb.)

Hatch put them on house arrest for the weekend, meaning they — and their parents — would be in violation of their court orders if the teenagers wandered away. Lutz suspended all three girls for that night’s game against Gleason High.

But they would not be kicked out of Carroll Academy.

The suspensions left Lutz with six players. Constance, a soft-spoken, 5-foot-2 eighth grader with a penchant for throwing things in anger — most recently her mother’s collection of porcelain figurines, leaving craters in the walls — managed a first-quarter



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free throw.

Leslee, a fast-talking ninth grader who usually started, fouled out in the third quarter. Two other girls were hurt badly enough in collisions to stop the game, but they managed to stay on the floor to the end.

Carroll Academy lost, 44-1.

“It ain’t about the record,” Hatch said. “You have nine girls. My job, and Tonya’s job, and everyone’s job, is to go 9-0 with them. If you go 8-1, you’ve had a losing season.”

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