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Growing Cheers for the Home-Schooled Team

By [JOE DRAPE](#)

OKLAHOMA CITY — Taber Spani, one of the best high school girls basketball players in the nation, holds hands with two opponents as a coach reads a Bible verse. It is the way each game in the National Christian Homeschool Basketball Championships begins.

This is more than a postseason tournament for the 300 boys and girls teams from 19 states that have competed here over the past six days. As the stands packed with parents and the baselines overrun by small children attest, this is also a jamboree to celebrate faith and family.

“You build friendships here with other girls who know what it’s like to be self-motivated and disciplined and share your values,” said Spani, a junior who plays for the Metro Academy [Mavericks](#) of Olathe, Kan. “I wouldn’t trade this tournament for anything.”

Only a decade ago, home-school athletics was considered little more than organized recess for children without traditional classrooms. Now, home-school players are tracked by scouts, and dozens of them have accepted scholarships to colleges as small as Blue Mountain in Mississippi and as well known as [Iowa State](#).

When the field for the [N.C.A.A.](#) women’s basketball tournament is selected Monday, there will be plenty more evidence that standout players can be plucked from a prayer circle as well as from a playground. Rachel McLeod of Liberty University, Corrie Hester of Oral Roberts and Shalin Spani of Kansas State, Taber’s older sister, all played in the national home-school tournament.

Taber Spani, however, is the movement’s most celebrated player. Two coaching giants in women’s college basketball, Connecticut’s [Geno Auriemma](#) and Tennessee’s Pat Summitt, who between them have won 12 national titles, are pursuing her.

An estimated two million children are schooled at home, and only 18 states have laws that grant them access to athletic teams at public schools. So it was perhaps inevitable that home-school programs and tournaments developed.

“As the home-school movement has gotten older, there has been much more demand for extracurricular activities,” said Ian M. Slatter, a spokesman for the Home School Legal Defense Association. “Parents had already crossed the hurdle of educating children at home, so now they have turned their energy and resources to athletics.”

Many of the best teams here were founded by some of the home-school athletic movement’s pioneers. In 1992, Tom Sanders bought some reversible jerseys and founded the Homeschool Christian Youth Association Warriors in Houston so his 14-year-old son could play organized basketball with his friends. He had to plead

with small Christian schools, even reform schools, to schedule 14 games that season.

By 1998, Sanders's program had sent Kevin Johnson, a 6-foot-8 center, to the [University of Tulsa](#) on a scholarship. Before this tournament, the Warriors had a 33-3 record against some of the best high school teams in Texas. Sanders's son Jesse will play for Rice next season. The Warriors were represented by 12 teams and more than 100 players last week.

Likewise, Tim Flatt has built the Oklahoma City Storm into a feared opponent among the state's high schools the past 10 years. His program has 125 boys and girls, ages 8 to 18, on 11 teams. As with most home-school groups, it was built on word of mouth and financed out of parents' pockets and the occasional bake sale.

"We went from not being very good to not being scheduled again after we beat some big schools," said Flatt, whose varsity boys team was 20-6 this season. "The culture has changed, and there is less of a stigma if you lose to a home-school team. It's not a slap in the face now when we beat a high school team. They know we make them better for their state playoffs."

In 2001, Flatt, a retired sports memorabilia dealer, took the National Christian Homeschool Basketball Championships here. He wanted to create not only a basketball showcase, but also a destination for families. He understood that fielding a home-school team remained an independent and often taxing endeavor. Rounding up opponents is a grind, as is raising as much as \$20,000 annually for uniforms, renting gyms and traveling to tournaments.

"A lot of home-school teams play in small gyms, church gyms, and they play against weaker competition," Flatt said. "They don't get to experience something at a national scale. I wanted to make the kids feel like they were getting big-time treatment, and their parents want to take a week of vacation to come here."

Flatt's vision was on full display Wednesday at the 5,000-seat Sawyer Center at Southern Nazarene University. It was standing room only as parents and children shared pizza and watched the National Christian Homeschool all-American boys and girls teams compete in all-star games, as well as 3-point and dunk contests.

"There's an aura about home-schoolers that we're nerds with Coke-bottle glasses," said Adam Krejci, who plays at nearby Oklahoma Christian University and helps with the tournament. "When you start talking about players like Taber, and you watch some of the teams and players coming through here, it is hard to laugh at us."

There was little doubt that Wednesday night belonged to Spani, a 6-1 left-handed guard. She drained 3-pointers, used nifty moves to score driving baskets, and hit teammates with precise no-look passes. It was difficult to tell who was more appreciative — the fans who cheered her or her parents, Gary and Stacey.

The Spanis knew they wanted to home-school their five daughters but were more aware than most how important sports might become to them. Gary is a former all-American linebacker at Kansas State who played nine seasons for the [Kansas City Chiefs](#) in the National Football League.; Stacey is the daughter of Frosty Westering, who won four national titles as the football coach at Pacific Lutheran University.

“Our Christian faith is No. 1 why we did it,” Gary Spani said of why he and Stacey chose to home-school their children. “We’re team oriented, and we wanted to make sure our family was supporting one another. We also agreed that when our daughters reached eighth grade, we’d let them decide if they wanted to go to high school.”

So far Shalin, Taber and Tanis, a sophomore, have decided to stay home and play for Stacey, who coached the Mavericks to a 30-5 record against high schools in Kansas and Missouri this season. Chances are good that Sajel, in seventh grade, and Tavis, in fourth grade, will also decide to keep their mother as their teacher and coach. It means that the Spanis will leave at 5:20 a.m. for the long drive to practice each day for eight more seasons.

“It’s a family thing — I wanted the opportunity to be with my sisters constantly,” Taber Spani said of continuing to be home-schooled. “It really was an easy decision. I never felt like I was going to be missed by colleges.”

She has, indeed, gotten looks from college recruiters, and more than 100 Division I teams have contacted her. Still, Spani says she is in no hurry to decide between Connecticut or Tennessee. She may even join her sister Shalin at Kansas State, their parents’ alma mater.

“No matter where I go, I’ll be ready,” she said. “No matter where I go, I’ll also miss this tournament. It really has been the highlight of my high school experience.”

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