

East's four core seniors rewarded for their hard work

BY JEFF LUTZ

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EMPORIA — One good thing about state championships is that once you win one, you're branded a winner regardless of how many times you've come up short. The disappointment of unfulfilled potential is forgotten.

Just ask Wichita East coach Ron Allen and his core group of four seniors, who won their first Class 6A basketball championship on Saturday with a 45-42 win over Hutchinson.

"It feels great," Allen said. "It's hard to explain in words. I feel tremendous for the kids, for the program, the school, the administration — it's the whole ball of wax all wrapped up into one."

The Aces captured their first state title since 1992, when Adrian Griffin led East to a victory over Shawnee Mission West.

East had a chance to dominate the 1990s when, in 1995, center Korleone Young joined the Aces, who already had a star in the making, Laverne Smith.

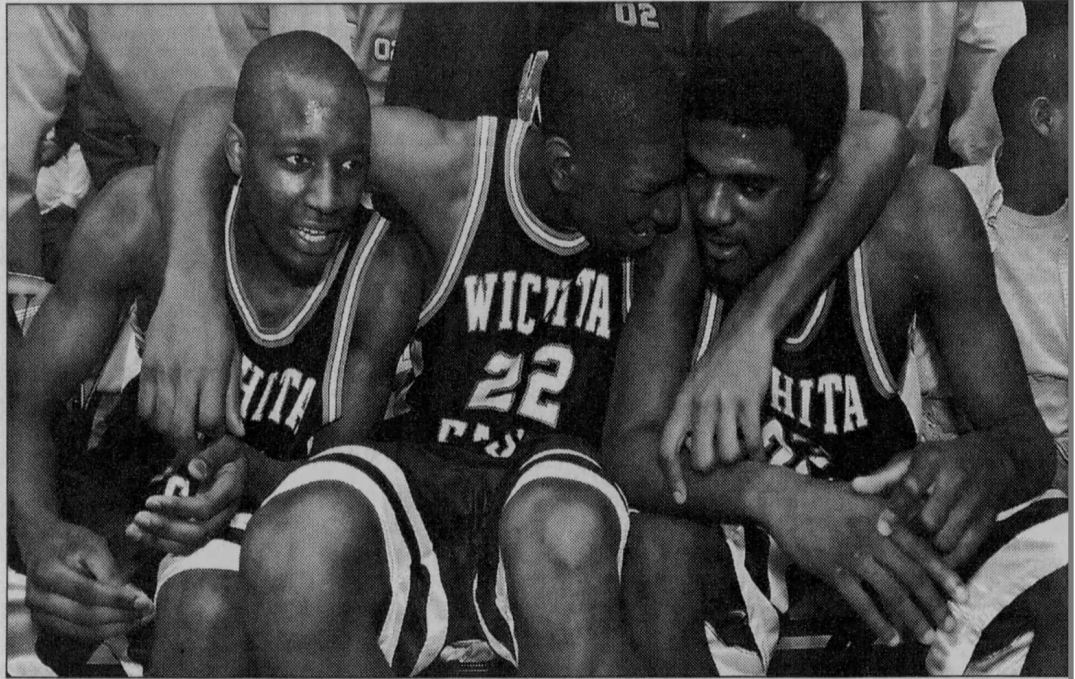
But that duo never finished better than third in the state tournament, and Allen was starting to become known as a coach who couldn't win under pressure.

Then a talented freshman class came to East, led by Taj Gray, who drew comparisons to Young the first day he stepped on the court.

Also in that class was Allen's son, R.J., who said he told his father that his class would eventually lead the Aces to the state championship.

"I wanted to win it for Taj, my father, because he's never won a state tournament," R.J. Allen said. "When I came to East, I promised him that our team was going to win it all, and I kept my promise."

Gray lived up to his individual expectations for three years but



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East's Taj Gray, center, embraces teammates Brandon Barrett, left, and Brent Freeman after the Aces won the 6A title on Saturday. "It meant everything," Gray said. "I wanted to go out in style, especially with a big win like this. This is what we worked hard all year for."

never led East to the state tournament until this season. The Aces suffered heartbreaking losses in substate the past two seasons.

Gray wasn't going to let that happen this year.

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Brent Freeman was the member of that freshman class with perhaps the biggest upside. But Freeman didn't see the court until his junior season thanks to grade problems.

Freeman said it was the dedication to him from his coach that willed him to turn over a new leaf.

"I was in a lot of trouble, and I was in and out of a lot of different schools," Freeman said. "And Coach Allen stuck with me. With him sticking with me, I repaid him. I repaid myself. I got my grades up and everything and stayed out of trouble."

Gray, R.J. Allen and Freeman played together in Biddy ball starting in fifth grade. When they went to East, chemistry wasn't a concern.

But it wasn't until a fourth player,

Brandon Barrett, joined East during his sophomore year that the group started to come together.

"We jelled right off the bat," Barrett said. "We had played against each other but never with each other."

All four players made key contributions in East's win Saturday. Gray led the Aces with 21 points. Allen scored 12, including East's first six, and Barrett scored six of his eight points in the fourth quarter.

Freeman had a three-point play that gave the Aces a four-point lead. It was important because

Hutchinson's Kyle Mendenhall made three free-throws after being fouled to cut East's lead to one.

"It just proves that good kids, the right attitude and hard work will take you a long way," Ron Allen said.

R.J. Allen, Gray and Freeman were glad they got to share the experience of a state title. Especially Freeman, who has known the Allen family since he was a kid.

"It's like family. They're like family to me," Freeman said. "I wouldn't want to share it with anybody else."

East state basketball championship

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