

Basketball helps Amityville's Croft and his mom get through tough times

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QUICK SUMMARY

Basketball has been the ultimate pain-killer for Darien Croft and his mother Lisa.



Photo credit: Joe Rogate | Amityville High School Basketball player Darien Croft with his mom Lisa at before a practice. (January 14, 2010)

For Amityville star guard Darien Croft and his single mother, Lisa Croft, basketball is the aspirin that makes life a little easier to swallow.

Through the adversity of Lisa's health problems, to the monthly disability check that needs to be supplemented by food stamps, to the family car that recently was totaled, to Darien's troubles on the streets a couple of years ago, basketball has been their ultimate pain-killer.

"I understand what my mom is going through," Croft said. "I used to let all the stress get to me. Now I'm learning how to put it to the side. I don't know how to explain it, but playing basketball takes a lot of stress off my shoulders. It's kind of like an escape."

Basketball has helped Croft put a reverse spin move on the difficult circumstances that surround him, and he shares every moment with his mom, who often doesn't have the strength or means to see him play.

"When he plays his game, he's happy. When he comes home and tells me about it, I can see that," Lisa said during an interview Thursday at Amityville High School, where she joined Darien and his father, Willie Freeman, her ex-husband, in a frank, wide-ranging, often poignant session.

"I'm so happy when he tells me he did well, I'll say, 'That's what you do, baby!' " she said. "If he's happy, I'm happy, too. That eases some of my pain and the trouble I'm going through."

Lisa says she cannot work because of her weakened state and has been able to attend only two of her son's games this season. She says she is in constant pain as doctors continue to probe for a diagnosis.

"It's tough not knowing," Darien said. "Lately, my mom's illness has gotten worse. She wakes me up for school in the morning, but she can't cook breakfast or dinner. She can't stand or sit in a certain place for a long time because she's always in pain."

Lisa winced frequently during the interview, and every time she closed her eyes from pain that clearly wracked her body, Darien would wince, too. But after a deep breath, Lisa Croft would continue. Meanwhile, the look of concern never left Darien's face. "I'll get through it," he said softly.

Basketball helps. Croft, a junior, has emerged as one of the best players in Suffolk. He's averaging 20.7 points a game, including a 32-point effort against Glenn Jan. 9 that concluded with his game-winning layup.

He didn't even start that game, getting punished by coach Jack Agostino for not working hard enough in practice the day before. "I got the message. That will never happen again," Croft said with a rueful grin.

"A little tough love," said Agostino, who has a fondness for Croft, often slipping the kid granola bars in the morning when Croft comes to school hungry. "He's a good kid who's getting it together."

It's a sign of maturity for Croft, who admits he "hung out with the wrong crowd" and got into some trouble the summer after ninth grade. He was living in Wyandanch with his father then and said he was "in the wrong place at the wrong time."

That's when Lisa insisted on moving Darien back to her family home in Amityville. "He was hanging around with some people who were going nowhere," Freeman said. "That's the 'hood. It's no joke here. People are dying for little things. Not too long ago, Darien was living in that environment."

Freeman then embraced Lisa, inducing tears from both parents. "I gotta give you a hug for that," he said. "I have to pat her on the back for getting him away from there. Without her, I don't know where this boy would be right now. She did it through thick and sick and thin . . ."

He then turned to Darien. "From me to you, Poppa is really proud of you," he said. "Just keep doing what you're doing and use your brain."

Croft's academic average this year is in the low 80s and he is taking an SAT prep course offered at the high school. Several colleges have contacted Agostino about Croft, an indication he has come a long way on the basketball court, too.

"In the ninth grade, I was doubting myself. I was smaller and I wasn't sure I could play," the 5-11 combo guard said. "Now I know every shot isn't going to fall, but I've definitely got the confidence."

Croft knows that if he keeps improving, scholarship offers could follow, and there's a chance he'll leave home to attend college. "Mom and I talk about it. She says if I go away, she'll understand and she'll always be there for me," Croft said.

"If he plays basketball and gets an education, I'm all for it," Lisa Croft said. "It's his choice to go away. I'll deal with it."

That's been an everyday mantra for mother and son: They'll deal with it. As Croft says of any future success, "I've got a story behind it."