Their first practices took place while everyone was making plans for Thanksgiving. For over three months, basketball season has dominated the Iron County sports scene.

In the next week or so, the sport will finally yield the spotlight, but only after thrilling action during high school tournament play.

The girls district tournaments took place last week. Not even last week's monster snowstorm could get in the way of West Iron County and Forest Park, as both schools won their district championships for the second straight year.

Both advance to this week's regional tournaments, taking place at Marquette (for the Wykons) and Kingsford (for the Lady Trojans). Best wishes to both teams, but however the games turn out, sincere congratulations and thanks for a pair of splendid seasons.

The two Iron County girls teams combined for 32 wins and only eight losses this season. Both teams produced their conference's most valuable player: senior Jaclyn Waara of West Iron and sophomore Lexi Gussert of Forest Park. It is the second MVP award for both girls

Both teams are also blessed with a rich roster of senior players. West Iron is senior-powered, with Waara, Shannon Koski, Joanna Pellizzer, Alexis Heimerl and Emily Aho serving in the front lines for the Wykons.

The Lady Trojans also have strong senior leadership from Tanner Bartczak, Audrey Sholander, Kaitlyn Shamion and Ana Cornelia.

Let's not forget the boys! The boys district tournaments take place this week. West Iron will be playing at Iron Mountain, and Forest Park hosts the Class D district.

West Iron's boys team had a winning record this year, 13-7, and the Wykons were boosted by their conference's MVP, senior Caleb Pellizzer. Forest Park has improved a lot during the season, with a winning record over the final third of the season.

From late November to now, in early March, all the young student-athletes on both teams have been spending hour after hour at practice, along with 20 game nights and many hours on school buses, riding here and there all winter for out-of-town games—while somehow managing to keep up with their studies and their personal and family lives.

That has been their life for years. Most played in the elementary grades, junior high and junior varsity. They have gone to camps and clinics to work on their skills. The real heroes behind the scenes are their families, who have sacrificed for them in many ways to make it all possible. They support them every step of the way, and they always will.

That's how it is for all high school athletes, in every sport, at every school.

We don't know all the personal stories, but we are especially proud to know those who have dealt with personal problems. Like the girl who underwent surgery during the season and came back strong … and the boy with a painful hip condition who always goes all out for his team.

We wish all our teams and all our young people the best of luck at their tournaments this week. Of course, we want them all to win.

But win or lose, we hope they will remember these times with fondness and pride as they move on through life and take their place in the world as confident young women and men, ready and willing to take on any task they may face in the years to come.

--Peter Nocerini