

SPEAKER: Red Lake even looks like a basketball town. It's a windblown, underdog kind of place, trashy gutters, sagging hoops in every yard, and barbed wire swaying atop a chain link fence circling the school.

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

But on the court, the Red Lake Warriors are nobody's underdog. Tonight, they're shellacking Nevis. The seventh graders won by 70. The eighth graders are up by 30 so far. B team and varsity games are still to come.

Nevis Assistant Coach Brian Wormley says there's no dishonor in losing to Red Lake. It's practically a tradition, one he was dipped in on a devastating game day years ago.

SPEAKER: We got blown away in the seventh-grade game. I can't remember that score. But the eighth-grade game, they were jamming on us and everything. It was 60 to, I think, it was five at halftime and 110 to 10 at the end of the game. And it was a shock.

[BUZZ]

SPEAKER: Though Red Lake has long had good teams, the Warriors came to wide attention only last year. Basketball fans across Minnesota witnessed the first pre-game drum ceremony ever performed at the state tournament.

The Warriors then lost to Wabasso in a game that broke scoring records. In the stands tonight, it's hard to find anyone who wasn't at that game.

SPEAKER: I think it put Red Lake on the map. And the crowd, the tremendous crowd they had is because of the first Indian team, the only Indian team that made the state tournament.

SPEAKER: We were just going down there and having our car decorated, Red Lake Warriors, and how proud we were.

SPEAKER: We love our team. And there's some cute boys out here.

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

SPEAKER: But this season has been more complicated than last, more sober. Just two months after Red Lake's momentous appearance at the State tournament, one of the warriors, senior, Wesley Strong, was stabbed to death after a graduation party.

Seized with grief, the team dedicated this season to his memory. Delwyn Holthusen, The Warriors' center and most visible star, is Wesley Strong's cousin.

SPEAKER: Yeah, he was going to come back this year because he's a [? credit ?] or so short. He was going to be our manager because last year, it was just like a big push for all of us.

When we're in practices, when you're feeling low or something, he'd get us up, just an up-tempo kid, and make us all happy, and push us to make us play harder. It brings back tears for me, man. It chokes me up.

SPEAKER: Strong's death has been a powerful team motivator, but it's also been more than that for the team and the community. Doug Dujali, the Warriors' coach, calls it a reminder of what's wrong on the Red Lake Reservation.

Too little discipline, Desjarlait says. Too much alcohol, too many smart kids who won't try college.

SPEAKER: My mother had told me, well, you're 18 now. You were the baby of the family. I raised all my kids and sent them to school, and it's time for you to leave too. More or less, they broke my plate, I guess, [LAUGHS] which they should be doing a lot more nowadays too.

But a lot of people are afraid to leave the reservation, period, because of all the racism or whatever you see on the outside. They're afraid if they leave, the reservation might not be here when they come home.

Desjarlait's like his mother, a disciplinarian. When his players got cocky earlier this season, reading too much about themselves in too many newspapers, he benched his starting five. The team had a couple embarrassing losses.

Right now, the Warriors are 20 and 3 and ranked 10th in the state in Class A. But there are new pressures this year from a hometown anxious for more success.

SPEAKER: We could go 30 knowing there'd still be people in this community that wouldn't-- that wouldn't think that was good enough. I love the game now, but I hate a lot of stuff that goes along with it, a lot of the long hours and expectations on the kids. The parents that know the game more than the coaches, I don't like that.

[DRUMMING, CHANTING]

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

SPEAKER: Play ball!

SPEAKER: Still, for many in Red Lake, this is much more than basketball. Sitting high in the bleachers is Delwyn Holthusen's father who played some ball himself 35 years ago. Fresh from the post office, Delwyn, Sr. Holds up a handful of college recruiting letters to his son.

SPEAKER: All over the country. Michigan, Nebraska, I wish him a lot of luck. I hope he goes-- I hope he stays good and clean and everything and goes all the way. It's his dream anyway.

SPEAKER: But that's the future. Here's what the Warriors want more immediately. They want to beat-- no, they want to pound-- Nevis, give the graduating seniors plenty of minutes in front of the home folks. And they want to get back to State to play the drums again with all of Minnesota watching.

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

This is Leif Enger, *Main Street Radio*.

SPEAKER: Come on! Come on!

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]