

BY ROB VANSTONE

The 71st Luther Invitational Tournament includes second-generation participants and notable firsts.

Consider the case of Jon Graf, who is coaching the Luther Lions' senior girls basketball team — of which his daughter, Megan, is a part — this weekend.

Jon Graf, a member of Luther College High School's faculty since 2004, graduated from the Royal Street-based campus 10 years earlier.

Although he didn't play in the tournament, he was closely involved with the student-run event. As a teacher, he was LIT's concessions advisor for nearly 20 years.

And now, for the first time, he is coaching at a prestigious event that has long been near and dear to his heart.

"The team is great," he said on Friday. "Every girl on the team works hard. Every girl is great. It's such a nice group of kids to coach.

"It just makes it extra-special that Megan's on the team as well."

On Day 1 of LIT 2025, Graf savoured a moment he will long remember.

"One of our players, Anji Otukoya, is in Grade 12," he said. "She didn't play last year. She took a year off playing and came back this year.

"During our first game, she got a steal, dribbled down the court and did a layup. Seeing her smile on the way back, I thought, 'This is amazing. This is why I do this.'

"That's the emotion I want these girls to have at this tournament. She was so happy. She got a steal and a layup on our biggest stage of basketball.

"Those kinds of things just make me so happy and joyful for this experience."

Rob Thomson's LIT experiences include a classic contest from 35 years ago.

He was a member of Balfour Collegiate's senior boys team when it advanced to the championship final, won 83-82 by Luther.

Thomson, who will coach the Martin Monarchs in Saturday night's senior boys final, scored 24 points for Balfour in the 1990 nail-biter. He also earned the tournament's Mr. Hustle Award.

Fast forward to 2025. Thomson is a head coach at LIT for the first time. The Monarchs' roster includes his son, Kobe.

"Martin is a small school," Rob Thomson said. "It was years in the making for us to get here.

“We always talk about how you get out of something what you put in. We had 20 guys try out for that team in Grade 9 and basically they stuck through it. It has taken four years of my voice and their commitment to qualify for LIT, so I’m super-proud of them.

“And then for me, it’s full circle. It’s extra special that my youngest boy gets an opportunity to hopefully have a similar experience to what I had back in 1990.”

With that in mind, Thomson showed his team a video of the ’90 final as this year’s tournament loomed.

“I think the boys were in shock that there *was* a video from 35 years ago,” Thomson said with a laugh.

“I know we didn’t come out of it on the winning side, but playing in a game that is iconic, legendary, I think all athletes strive to be in an atmosphere like that and compete. You leave it all on the floor. At the end of the day, it was disappointing, but we felt pretty good because we walked out of there proudly.

“We talk about a lot of different things and about life. We talk about truth before harmony. I said, ‘Here’s the truth. This is tough for me, but I want you guys to understand the experience. I want you to see the plays and how we handled it back then. Maybe you can get something from that.’ ”

Luther’s 1990 championship team was coached by Paul Humbert. His daughter, Madeline Humbert, is coaching the Saskatoon Centennial Chargers senior girls at this year’s event.

“It’s such a big honour to be invited to this tournament,” she said. “LIT is a world-class tournament.

“It’s so special because, growing up, I always heard about how amazing LIT is. When we moved to Saskatoon and my dad coached at Aden Bowman, I remember being a little kid at that (old) gym over there (at Luther) and seeing the atmosphere and how important all those games were. I remember the snow-kones they used to sell at halftime and thinking, ‘This is the highlight of the tournament!’

“To be able to be there and to have it now be a male and female tournament is so cool to see.”

LIT was exclusively a male event from 1953 to 2012. A smaller-in-scale female component, known as the Challenge Cup, was introduced in 2013. Since 2016, both the male and female draws have consisted of eight teams.

Madeline Humbert was born in Regina when her dad was a teacher-coach at Luther.

“I only lived in Regina for a year, but I always say, ‘It’s the best year of my life,’ ” she said. “It’s so cool to know that if we would have stayed in Regina, this would have been the high school I would have attended.

“This school is so rich in history. You walk around and you see all these pictures of all these prominent people who played such a big role in the history of this tournament.

“You walk through these halls and you know that basketball matters and student excellence matters.”

Family matters, too.

“My dad coached me when I was playing high school,” Madeline Humbert recalled. “Growing up, I got to see him coach all these teams that meant so much to him.

“Now I’m taking on more of these head-coaching positions and he has really been a mentor to me. He’s always the first call after a game. I want to debrief about how it went.

“Just seeing him in the crowd and knowing how special it is for him to now be here supporting me as a coach, it has been awesome. He’s so proud to be a dad and so proud to have me in the space of being able to coach this amazing Centennial team.

“I’m so fortunate to get to work with such a great group. No matter what the score is, we’ve had such great engagement from our bench and the people on the bench.

“I’m just so honoured to be here.”

NOTES: Martin will meet the Saskatoon Walter Murray Marauders in Saturday’s senior boys final (8 p.m.). The senior girls championship game, between the Lethbridge Collegiate Institute Clippers and Winnipeg Dakota Lancers, is slated for 6 p.m. Both finals are to be played in the Semple Gymnasium.

