



PRESS RELEASE

## Finalists announced for inaugural RUSSELL ATHLETIC 'Together We R' Team Award

ATLANTA (March 14, 2012) – The Indiana Wesleyan, Middle Tennessee State and Oklahoma State women's basketball programs are finalists for the inaugural RUSSELL ATHLETIC "Together We R" Team Award, the Women's Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) announced today.

In its first year, the "Together We R" Team Award honors programs that have strived to succeed in the face of adversity, overcoming extraordinary circumstances such as an unforeseen team crisis, barrier or unfortunate situation that caused extra stress. The team must exemplify strong commitment to core values of togetherness, courage, unparalleled work ethic and heart, and must personify the "Together We R" belief that teams are stronger than individuals.

The finalists – selected by a committee of WBCA past presidents – have each submitted a video telling their story. The videos are posted on the WBCA's YouTube channel:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/WBCABasketball>

WBCA members and fans alike can vote by "liking" the video for the team they think is most deserving of the award. The fans' choice, determined by the video receiving the most "likes," will receive one additional vote when the selection committee selects the winner.

### Indiana Wesleyan

Top-ranked Indiana Wesleyan (32–2) lost two leading players to ACL tears and a third, who left the team for personal reasons. While those were heart wrenching, none were as hard to handle as the loss of a fourth teammate to colon and liver cancer. The team has embraced the on-court spirit of each lost teammates to power through the season all the way to an NAIA Division II Mid-Central Conference championship Feb. 27 and a first-round win in the NAIA Division II National Championship tournament on March 7.

'These situations were all hard for us. We felt like we were under attack. The kids adopted Leah's verse that she clung to during her final days – Deuteronomy 31:6, "Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or terrified of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." Our motto has been, "You are either making excuses or progress." We will not, and have not, used the circumstances with Leah, Ashley, Liz and Taylor as an excuse.'

### Middle Tennessee State

Middle Tennessee State has broken every team huddle with 'Together for T on 3' since the start of the season. Following the death of teammate Tina Stewart last March, the Blue Raiders have worn her number – 20 – with pride, striving to carry on her 'go hard or go home' mentality. The Sun Belt Conference tournament runners-up boast a 26–6 record and landed three student-athletes on the conference championship's all-tournament team – more than any other institution.

'Although Tina's death tore us apart inside, it welded us together as a team. We cried and then we played through the pain the only way we knew how; the way Tina certainly would have wanted us to. We wore Tina's number as "20GETHER" because it exemplified what we represented as we capped our season with an at-large [2011] NCAA tournament bid. Every time the Lady Raiders step on the court, we know Tina is looking down on us, cheering us on!'

### Oklahoma State

Oklahoma State (16–12) faced the unthinkable in mid-November when then head coach Kurt Budke and assistant coach Miranda Serna, along with two others, were killed in a plane crash. A mentor in the Stillwater community and the Cowgirls' leader, Budke was talking about making an impact during the 2011–12 season just days before the tragedy – the second of its kind to hit the Oklahoma State family in just a single decade. Current head coach Jim Littell stood strong for the team, taking the reins and leading them to remarkable upset wins over Oklahoma and 2011 national champion Texas A&M.

'The Oklahoma State University women's basketball team lost their leader and a father figure in head coach Kurt Budke and a mother figure and friend in assistant coach Miranda Serna. These two people were the main reasons why many of them chose to attend Oklahoma State. The way they play the game, the passion and effort in which they step out on the court with is not only admirable, but also a sign of strength.'

"While no team should have to bare the tragedies these have, the WBCA is proud of how they have banded together to overcome the unthinkable," said WBCA CEO Beth Bass. "Each of these teams deserves to be recognized for the strength as a team and support for each other they have shown throughout this season. By embodying the spirit of 'Together We R', each program has shown no matter the battle, it's easier faced as a team."

"Russell Athletic would like to recognize the teams that have overcome tremendous adversity," said Executive Vice President Gary Barfield. "These teams worked together to be successful on the court after dealing with tough circumstances. This is the true spirit of 'Together We R.' We are pleased to be able to recognize their triumphs over adversity with the Russell Athletic 'Together We R' Team Award."

The recipient of the "Together We R" Team Award will be announced and formally recognized during the second annual WBCA Awards Show, which will be held at 5 p.m. MT Monday, April 2, at the Sheraton Downtown Denver. This event is part of the WBCA National Convention and is held in conjunction with the NCAA® Women's Final Four®.

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#### About the WBCA:

Founded in 1981, the Women's Basketball Coaches Association promotes women's basketball by unifying coaches at all levels to develop a reputable identity for the sport and to foster and promote the development of the game as a sport for women and girls. The WBCA is pleased to join the women's sports community in commemorating the 40th anniversary of Title IX, which was passed by Congress on June 23, 1972, and provides females with equal opportunities in athletics in the U.S. For more information on the WBCA, please visit [wbca.org](http://wbca.org).