How Jake Stewart and the Washington Panthers are Keeping a Tradition Alive

November is always a special time of the year in Washington, Illinois. The spring sports are coming to an end, and the winter sports just getting started. With the winter sports starting, that means the Kevin Brown Memorial Tournament of Champions tradition continues. This high school boys’ basketball tournament is always circled on the calendar for the city of Washington for two reasons. The first being the start of a new basketball season and to honor the late panther head coach, Kevin Brown, who died from brain cancer three years ago and who the tournament is named after.

“I always look forward to playing in the ToC” said Jake Stewart, a senior on this year’s Washington panther basketball team. “And to have the tournament named after coach is really nice. It’s an honor for us to carry on his legacy at the school and what he started with the basketball team.”

Stewart can not recall a time when Coach Brown was not in his life. “My dad was best friends with coach, so he was in the room when I was born.” And ever since that day, a new relationship was formed that was bigger than basketball. “He was like another father to me. He would often take my brother and I to his family events and his wife Jodi would take me to the basketball games.”

Once Stewart was old enough to understand basketball, he knew that was the sport he wanted to play. And being around the coach Brown and the basketball team, it was no surprise when Stewart said he wanted to play for the Washington panthers. “Playing for Washington to me is tradition. Growing up I always wanted to run out of that tunnel following the footsteps of panther greats such as Matt Roth, Lou Griffith, and Devin Whitelow. The traditions they adopted and the hard work they put in are still preached to this day,” Stewart said.

Tradition is what led the Tournament of Champions committee to change the name of the tournament. The new named Kevin Brown Memorial Tournament of Champions is all about tradition. Kevin Brown was the head coach for the panthers for 15 years and instilled toughness for his teams. Everyone knew that when you played Washington, it was going to be a battle. Coach Brown had to face a different battle when he was diagnosed with Glioblastoma in the fall of 2018, weeks before the tournament of champions was set to tipoff. And yet, toughness prevailed when he battled his way back to the court to coach. This toughness was never overlooked. “The biggest thing I learned from Coach Brown was to never give up. Coach was very sick and battled his cancer. Seeing him coach on the sideline while wearing an optune showed how tough Coach was. Many times, Coach could have said his battle was too hard, but he never gave up and he fought till the end,” Stewart said.

Stewart is ready to lead the panthers to another successful season. “Unlike the past couple years, my role now is to be a leader. As a senior on the team, I have to be more vocal on the court and lead by example.” And of course, the thought of Coach Brown still motivates the senior point guard. “. When times get hard, I often think about him and what he went through. Multiple brain surgeries while also trying to coach a basketball team. When practices get tough, or games don't go my way I often think about what Coach would do. One thing is for certain and it's that he'd never give up.”

This year’s tournament is set to tipoff on Friday, November 21st, at Washington Community High School. Each year, the tournament brings in top talent from across the country. This year’s tournament is headlined by St. Rida out of Chicago and Winter Haven, who is traveling from Florida. Stewart says, “It’s always cool to play teams that are not from Illinois and get to see what basketball is like outside of Illinois. Coach Brown was always wanting to play the best teams possible and that is what happens at the ToC.”

Tickets go on sale Wednesday, November 19th. For more information on this year’s tournament, visit <https://kbstrong-fightingthefight.com/>.