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## **Nero, Gard to be recognized by Indiana Basketball Coaches Association**

Evansville North boys' assistant, Lake Central girls' assistant to receive 2025 IBCA/PGC Transformational Coach awards

Two Indiana high school coaches will receive special awards from the Indiana Basketball Coaches Association in 2025, it was announced Monday (March 31).

Evansville North boys' assistant coach Zac Nero and Lake Central girls' assistant coach Rick Gard each will be recognized with a Point Guard College/Indiana Transformational Coach Award as presented by the IBCA.

This is the ninth year for the IBCA/PGC Transformational Coach Awards, which are presented to coaches who have impacted the lives of their players and fellow coaches at their school and within their community. The recipients are coaches who are respected by their players and fellow coaches for their dedication, positive approach and integrity on and off the court. Point Guard College is a corporate partner of the IBCA.

These awards will be presented during the 2025 IBCA Clinic on April 24-25 at Mt. Vernon High School in Fortville.

Previous PGC/Indiana Transformational Coach Awards have gone to Gary Cook of North Decatur in 2017; Chris Buggs of Gary West and Adam Dennis of Switzerland County in 2018; Travis Hannah of John Glenn in 2019; RaNae Isaak of Columbus North and Jim Merlie of Speedway in 2020; Steve Bradley of Lawrenceburg and Debbie Smiley of Brownsburg in 2021; Kevin Bradshaw of Eminence and Karl Turk of Cloverdale in 2022; Kelsey Block of Madison and Chris Willis of Wapahani in 2023; and Nate Blank of Terre Haute North and SJ Houston of Lafayette Jefferson in 2024.

Information on Nero and Gard, the 2025 honorees, follows.

### **Zac Nero, Evansville North boys' assistant**



Dedicated. Unselfish. Energetic. All three qualities accurately describe Zac Nero, who has served as a boys' basketball assistant coach for the past 12 seasons at Evansville North High School.

Beyond his role in basketball, Nero also has been an Evansville North assistant football coach for 11 seasons and currently is in his 12th season as Evansville North assistant track coach. He also assists with strength and conditioning for all three sports and serves as a nutritional advisor to the wrestling and girls' basketball programs. And all of these duties are in addition to his primary role as a health and physical education teacher at the school.

Acknowledging his many contributions to his school both on and off the court (or field), Nero has been selected as a winner of the 2025 IBCA/PGC Transformational Coach Award.

"Beyond his coaching and teaching roles, Coach Nero has had a profound impact on the culture and community at Evansville North High School," Huskies boys' basketball coach Jason Roach said in nominating Nero for this recognition. "His dedication extends far beyond athletics as he serves as a mentor and role model for

countless students, guiding them to not only excel in sports but also to develop strong character and discipline.

"Coach Nero fosters a sense of teamwork and perseverance, helping students navigate challenges both on and off the field. His involvement in the local community is equally remarkable as he regularly volunteers for school events, youth camps and clinics, demonstrating his commitment to giving back. Coach Nero's influence is felt throughout North High School, as he inspires students and fellow staff members to strive for excellence, embrace hard work and show kindness and respect in everything they do."

Nero is a 2007 graduate of Evansville Harrison High School, where he played football and threw the discus in track & field. He went on to Indiana State, where he was part of the Sycamores' football program for

four years. He then went to the University of Southern Indiana, competing in track & field as a thrower for one season for the Screaming Eagles and completing his bachelor's degree in sports management in 2016. He later completed a Transition-to-Teaching program at Oakland City University in 2020.

Nero began his coaching career while a student at USI, assisting in football at Evansville Memorial in 2012 and 2013. He joined the Evansville North staff for the 2013-14 basketball season as the freshman boys' coach, became the school's throws coach in track that spring and made Evansville North a year-round home as a defensive line coach in football that fall. He became the boys' basketball JV coach in 2014-15, has served as boys' basketball varsity assistant since 2015-16 and has been the football defensive coordinator starting in 2022.

In the classroom, Nero was an Evansville North full-time substitute in 2013-14 and worked as the in-school suspension coordinator from 2014-16. He was a social and emotional learning interventionist at Evans Elementary from 2016-20, then returned to Evansville North as a health and physical education teacher in 2020.

"Coach Nero consistently demonstrates his dedication through his tireless work ethic and unwavering commitment to his students and athletes," Roach said. "Whether on the field, in the classroom or behind the scenes, he approaches every task with enthusiasm and a positive attitude, encouraging others to do the same. His integrity is evident in the way he holds himself and his athletes to the highest standards, always prioritizing fairness, respect and accountability."

Roach noted the successes of the Evansville North programs in which Nero has a hand. Boys' basketball has won sectionals in 2018 and 2022, football raised a sectional trophy in 2023 and track teams claimed six sectionals (boys in 2019, 2022, 2023 and 2024 plus girls in 2016 and 2017). In addition, girls' track won a regional in 2017, and three of his track athletes have placed in the top nine in the state meet.

"Coach Nero's loyalty to his students, colleagues and the school is unmatched," Roach said. "He consistently goes above and beyond to support and uplift those around him, creating a strong sense of trust and unity. His consistent approach to supporting others with kindness and fairness has made him a trusted figure among both students and staff. Coach Nero is a tremendous asset to everyone here at North High School."

Nero is a fan of the Green Bay Packers, Milwaukee Bucks, Indiana State Sycamores and Wisconsin Badgers. In his free time, he enjoys time with family and "trying" to play golf.

He and his wife, Elizabeth, are parents to Angelo, Giavanna and Luciana.

## **Rick Gard, Lake Central girls' assistant**



To say that Rick Gard is committed to serve the youth in his community would be a large understatement.

A girls' basketball assistant coach at Lake Central High School, Gard has been a part of athletics at the northwest Indiana school for 17 years as a coach or in a support role. Over the past nine years, Gard also has served the community through his work at American Community Bank of Indiana in Saint John, Ind. In recognition of all those efforts, Gard has been selected as a winner of the 2025 IBCA/PGC Transformational Coach Award.

"Rick significantly contributes to the development of leadership skills among our players," Lake Central girls' varsity coach Joe Huppenthal said in nominating Gard for this award. "By assigning roles, encouraging initiative and promoting accountability, he helps provide players with opportunities to harness and refine their leadership abilities. These leadership experiences prepare them for roles beyond sports, equipping them with the skills necessary for success in various aspects

of life.

"Coach Gard is responsible for much of the proverbial 'smaller things' within our program. He is instrumental in being a liaison between the head coach and players. He is a tireless worker and responsible for all gear orders, fund-raising efforts and game video breakdown as well as recording. Rick also contributes to practice planning and game preparation. He creates scouting reports with elite detail."

Huppenthal noted that Gard is vital in community relations, program promotion and alumna networking for the Lake Central program. As part of those duties, he created and designed a 40-page record book,

oversees the program's social media accounts and organized a 30-year celebration of the 1994 state championship team – including a catered dinner, T-shirts for each alumna and a video board montage to honor them. He also helps organize the program's annual golf outing, which provides funds for the entire season.

"His networking ability accrues tremendous sponsorship and participation, which leads to financial support from our community," Huppenthal said.

Gard is a 2012 graduate of Lake Central, where he was a four-year boys' basketball manager for teams that won the 2012 Duneland Conference and 2012 sectional titles for coach Dave Milausnic. Gard matriculated to Indiana University Northwest, earning bachelor's degrees in finance and business in 2016.

While in college, Gard continued to contribute to Lake Central athletics and its feeder schools. He was a Lake Central girls' basketball volunteer assistant coach for Marc Urban from 2012-14, an eighth-grade boys' assistant at Grimmer Middle School in 2014 and 2015, a seventh-grade boys' assistant at Clark Middle School in 2016 and an eighth-grade girls' assistant at Clark Middle School in 2016 and 2017.

Gard rejoined the high school staff as a girls' freshman assistant from 2017-19, was the girls' freshman head coach in 2019-20, the girls' JV head coach from 2020-24 and served as the girls' varsity assistant in 2024-25. While a part of the high school girls' program, he has helped Lake Central capture three Duneland Conference championships (2018, 2023, 2024), five sectional titles (2013, 2018, 2022, 2023, 2024), two regional titles (2023, 2024), one semi-state crown (2024) and a 2024 Class 4A state runner-up finish.

Most importantly, Gard always is there for the players when they need him.

"Coaches are mentors and confidants, and Rick is just that," Huppenthal said. "He provides encouragement, guidance and emotional support, which helps our players navigate not only basketball but also life. Rick has an instinct for recognizing talents and strengths. This allows him to create strong bonds with our players and staff. This significantly boosts confidence in everyone and drives our girls to excel. Coach Gard invests in our players year round, it does not matter the time or place. He is there for our girls."

This past season, the roles were reversed when the players and other coaches were there for Gard when he and his wife, Anna, needed them. During the season, with Anna pregnant with twins, complications developed with the pregnancy and the couple learned that one of the babies was not doing well. They had to travel twice each week more than an hour each way to Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago for screenings and doctor visits. Then in January, Anna's health was endangered and she was forced into premature labor.

"One of their newborns (Cohen) was deceased at birth and the other was alive and struggling," Huppenthal said. "Just hours later, the second baby (Garrett) passed and Anna was fighting for her life. I share this because Coach Gard lost two children, nearly lost his wife and went through mental and physical exhaustion and stressors every day for several weeks. This did not stop him from being the best coach, mentor, leader and friend he can be. Our program preaches leadership and support, and Ricky modeled this greatly – albeit, for an awful situation."

Gard has worked for American Community Bank since 2016, the past four years as a vice president in commercial lending. In his free time, he enjoys traveling and hiking with Anna as well as watching the Chicago Cubs, Notre Dame football, Indiana University basketball, the Chicago Bears and the Chicago Blackhawks.

"The impact a coach has on his players extends far beyond the confines of the sport itself," Huppenthal said. "It influences their personal development, teamwork and overall character. Rick's ability to promote resiliency within our girls and focus on discipline will lead them righteously in life. They have learned so much about goal setting and achievement and to believe that anything is achievable with attention to detail and pride."