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The Walter Siblings hold the object that has helped them create a legacy. From left Katie, Matt, Ryan, and Nicole. Next year the era of having at least one Walter in a Ionia uniform will end.

End of an Era on the Ionia High court

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IONIA — Last November, an era ended when the Lady Dawgs' season ended in the state quarterfinals in late November.

Over the past 12 years the last name "Walter" has been synonymous with Ionia High School basketball. Over that time the four children of Steve and Deb Walter have represented the family name well with their play on the hard court.

It all began back in 1992 when Nicole Walter, now Nicole Lemke, made the girls varsity team. In her time as a member of the Lady 'Dawgs' she went on to start three seasons, score more than 1,000 career points, and help her team to three district championships.

She still resides in Ionia with her husband Jim.

After Nicole graduated in 1996, her brother Ryan took over on the boys varsity team as a freshman, starting all four seasons that he played under head coach Scott Swinehart.

Throughout his time as a member of a few of the best Bulldog teams ever he, like his sister before him, surpassed the 1,000-point milestone. He then went on to play four seasons at Spring Arbor University while receiving a degree in teaching.

In 2001, younger brother Matt filled the void left by his older sibling as he went on to write his name into the Walter legacy. Although he never amassed the individual numbers that his older brother and sister did, the two-year varsity player became one of the greatest leaders to ever don the Ionia blue and white. He is now attending Olivet College where he is majoring in physical education while minoring in history. He has also just completed

his first season as a member of the football team.

Over the last three years the youngest Walter sibling has been giving the Ionia girls' team a steady hand at the point-guard position. Katie Walter has just finished up a three-year tenure as a starter for Andy Barr's Lady Dawgs, leading IHS to its first regional championship in history of the program. She was also named a senior co-captain this season.

The success of the family started well before high school, back when their father coached at Ss. Peter and Paul.

During his time at the catholic school, he played a major role in his kids' development and passion for the game while mother Deb was there as a strong supporter.

"Dad was willing to push us, but when we did a good job he was always their to tell us," Katie said. "Mom was also a great cheerleader on the side-

lines."

Even after guiding them from the bench, he has enjoyed watching their development at the high school level.

"It's been fun," Steve said, "I know Deb complained a bit, but she loved every minute of it," he joked.

Other than their father, the Walter siblings found that their new coaches in the Bulldog programs were very influential. From them they learned to become better on and off the court.

"I grew up a lot in high school," Matt said. "Ben Kirby taught me a lot and I am a better person for it."

Ryan really felt the influence of Coach Scott Swinehart. That's why he has come back to Ionia to assist under Swinehart on the varsity coaching staff.

"He taught me to be a better player and we have become good friends," he said. "He's been like a second father to me.

He used to pick me up and help me with school work when I needed it."

The girls also have fond memories of their coaches. Jim VanSyckle was Nicole's coach and she said that he was always their for her. Katie has also developed a close relationship with Coach Andy Barr over their time together as player and coach.

Looking ahead to next fall, it is hard for the family to fathom not hearing their name during any of the boys or girls games. For the four siblings it will be a little strange.

"It will be weird, very weird," said Nicole.

Next season will also be a change for Steve. Although he will miss watching his kids play, the experience of watching Ionia basketball next season will be a little calmer than it has been since 1991.

"It will be better for my heart," Steve joked.