Holyoke High School's boys' basketball team achieved runner-up honors in the entire state of Colorado in 2A basketball last weekend, and the size of the Dragon cheering section was phenomenal.

Holyoke turned out in full force to cheer on a team that has won our hearts throughout the season and even before.

Cheerleaders, Pep Band, other students, faculty, former faculty, family, college students, former HHS basketball players, loyal fans with no particular ties to this team and more were wearing Dragon green at Saturday's championship ball game in Pueblo. We're not talking about a one-hour trip, but a real time commitment to support the Dragons.

Timing is perfect with St. Patrick's Day so close to the state basketball tournament. Green wigs, beads, clothing and more were easily accessible, and the fans displayed their loyalty well.

Painted faces, spiked hair, zany costumes—all represented a break from the norm for fans to show their allegiance to a team they believe in.

Understandably, for the players, coaches and all of us, it was a sad ending, with such a close shot at the championship. Trailing by only one point with 50 seconds remaining in the game, the ultimate gold ball was in sight.

But it was not meant to be, and the three-point loss was marked for the written record.

Waiting for team members to emerge from the locker room after the final ball game in Pueblo, I observed so much that continues to make this Dragon team champions in my book.

The HHS basketball players of tomorrow, from preschool through junior high age, all felt the loss as if it was their own. This team has made us all feel a part of their fantastic season.

When the young children waited at the front of the line to greet their heroes, they were not disappointed. Austin Tharp had a smile, a hand shake, a fist-bump or high-five—whatever was appropriate. And his response maintained his "champion" status as he moved on to share deeper emotions with family.

Hugs of support from dads, moms, siblings, grandparents and friends sealed family connections and displayed a community camaraderie that is nothing but healthy.

It was heart-wrenching, at best, and as one fan standing by me said, "I learned a long time ago that it feels a whole lot better to win." Witnessing the disappointment of a team we love made all of us cry.

When the emotion of the moment fades beyond the ball game, it's with much pride that this team's success can be recorded.

Only two losses in a season, and both to state champions, ranks Holyoke right up there.

As a team, the Dragons set a new statewide record by holding their opponents to an average of only 34.30 points per game.

Individual gains were attained throughout the season for the benefit of the team.

At the state tournament alone, there was so much to be proud of.

Austin repeatedly demonstrated his amazing ability to come out of a scramble with the ball, and he hit free throws that made huge impacts on the first two games. He was a well-deserved all-tourney team pick.

Colby Wailes was on target in the semis, starting off the scoring with a trey, then hitting a two-pointer and then another three-point shot for Holyoke's first eight points.

Michal Brown's height and long arms were a force to reckon with, even against some very tall opponents.

Those three seniors will be missed.

Kyle Carper finesses his way to the basket in such smooth style, it's fun to watch. In

fourth-quarter action in the state finals, he maneuvered and twisted through two or three defenders and came up with two-point baskets. He earned his selection to the all-tourney team.

Ryan Baumgartner sets up the offense and does a phenomenal job of it. He’s steady and smart, reading both his teammates and the opposition with much expertise.

Evan Swanson was on the mark in the finals, hitting three treys and another two-point basket for strong contribution to the team.

Logan Krueger started the season late after a football injury forced knee surgery. He added much depth to the team and was a solid player.

Coaches John Baumgartner and Scott Dille certainly deserve credit, as well, as do other members of the Dragon varsity, team manager and statskeepers.

It may not be on the CHSAA books, but the HHS 2008-09 boys’ basketball team members are champions in Holyoke.

We’re proud of you.