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LAMORINDA SPORTS

Acalanes girls win NCS Championship



Acalanes High School girls basketball NCS Champions

Photo Jon Kingdon

By Jon Kingdon

Acalanes, a team with no seniors, starting four freshman for most of the season and finishing last season ranked 294th in the state, came into this championship game ranked 44th and ran away with a dominating 57-37 victory over Northgate.

Having defeated Northgate two times earlier in the season by 20 and 23 points, the main concern for Acalanes' head coach Margaret Gartner, prior to their third meeting this season, was the possibility of her team being overconfident. "We talked about how it's tough to beat a team three times in a season so how we started out in this game was key," Gartner said.

After scoring the first two points six seconds into the game, it was simply a matter of not looking back. The Lady Dons were clearly in control leading by 17-3 at the end of the first quarter and 28-10 at the half.

"I'm not sure we can play a better half," Gartner said. "That was spectacular and some of our shooting was awesome. The last time that we had played Northgate, we had seven turnovers in the first quarter, and I told our team we couldn't do that again."

In their previous two games versus Northgate, Sophie Gartner, Dulci Vail and Karyss Lacanlale had all missed some time, but the team was very healthy though junior guard Sophia Alvarado suffered a shoulder injury in pregame and was forced to watch the game with her arm in a sling. "This was the first time we had everyone together, so I didn't want the team to be overconfident," Gartner said.

That was advice that Northgate could have used. The Dons forced Northgate into committing 29 turnovers, 19 in the first half, which speaks to Gartner's philosophy on the importance of her team's defense. "Right from day one, it was always about defense for us,"

Gartner said. "You can't count on your shot going in, but you can count on effort, defense and rebounding. So, in every practice, we work on 1-on-1, 1-on-2, 2-on-2, getting up and down the court."

Freshman Sophie Chinn was in the zone on offense, leading Acalanes with 31 points, including seven 3-point field goals, highlighted by a 35-footer at the end of the third quarter. Chinn was all over the floor on offense, either bringing the ball up the court, shooting from the wing and playing the post inside. She also had several steals on defense and led the team with 13 rebounds. "Sophie loves to guard our opponents' best player," Gartner said.

Chinn's ability to fill several positions has been a key to the team's success. "During COVID, Sophie would play point guard though I was a little worried about not getting as many rebounds," Gartner said.

Despite having a roster with no se-

niors, the team came together quickly. "From the start of the season we worked really well together and bonded as a team," Chinn said. "That was reflected on the court, and we have always been ready to come out and play."

Junior Emily Du assumed a mantle of influence with the underclassmen this season. "As the oldest player on the team, I've taken leadership role," Du said. "It's been really fun making a connection with my teammates who are not in my grade and my coaches. I've really learned from the best about leadership."

When a team will press and fast break all game, like Acalanes does, the players had better be in top shape. "We were running the track everyday and lifting weights," Du said. Everybody was dedicated to the team, and it became their first priority. "It was then that I knew we were going to be really good. It was made clear to us that our conditioning would make the difference between winning and losing games."

The team's conditioning was once again an important aspect in the victory. "We knew that we could wear Northgate down if we could make them work 90 feet," Gartner said. "We just wanted to outwork them and hoped that the ball would go in on offense."

The loud and boisterous crowd was appreciated by the players and coaches alike. "We all worked together tonight as a team," Chinn said. "We had so many fans with us, and it really helped us on offense and defense. The crowd was great. Everyone was into the game and their reaction after every shot we made was awesome."

The Acalanes fans did have a negative effect on the game for the Dons in the fourth quarter. Someone in the crowd threw a ball at a Northgate player which resulted in a technical foul called against Acalanes. With 5:30 to go in the fourth quarter, the officials called the players together at midcourt to calm things down. "They told us to have a clean game and to continue playing," Chinn said. "We should ignore the fans and keep working hard on the court."

When Gartner was asked if they were going to take time to celebrate the NCS championship, her answer spoke volumes as to the commitment she and the team had to the upcoming state tournament: "Actually, we're going to practice tomorrow. Back to the gym!"

Campolindo boys win NCS Championship in nail-biter



Photo Will Bergen

By Jon Kingdon

If it's possible to say that a 51-50 vic-

tory was closer than it looked, it was Campolindo's win over De La Salle in the NCS championship last Friday night.

It all came down to a missed free throw by De La Salle with 0.6 seconds left in the game that was rebounded by Aidan Mahaney that sealed the vic-

tory for the Cougars, their 21st straight win and going into the upcoming state tournament with a 27-1 record.

Mahaney led the scoring for Campolindo with 18 points, followed by starting senior Cade Bennett and Justin Yasukochi, who came in off the bench, each scoring 13 points.

Campolindo head coach Steven Dyer was not surprised at how Yasukochi elevated his performance. "Justin knows how to play in big games," Dyer said. "He is experienced and is big shot maker and we have all the confidence in the world going to him, knowing he can step up."

As has often been the case, in their last two games, Campolindo displayed the ability to come from behind in the fourth quarter. "It's both mental and physical toughness," Dyer said. "A lot of the things that we've gone through this year, you can't replicate in practice - trying to close out games, make free throws and holding the ball. The playoffs have shown how good our league was this year. Clayton Valley won the D1 championship, Northgate beat Dublin and Miramonte, as we know, is really good. The top four teams in this league have all been battle tested."

On to the state tournament.