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Lamorinda girls basketball season summary

By Jon Kingdon



Clair Steele Photo Gint Federas

With Miramonte, Campolindo and Acalanes finishing 1-2-3 in division and all three making the playoffs, it would have to be considered an overall success for Lamorinda.

Coming into the North Coast Section championship game with 15 straight victories, Miramonte came up short at the end, losing to Bishop O'Dowd by a score of 75-71.

With a 21-4 regular season record and 10-0 in league play, the Matadors were seldom challenged after a Jan. 6 loss to Carondelet. Thus, a tense, back forth game in the championship game could prove to have some benefit for the team.

Is there a positive to a game like this, as the Matadors begin their march into the state tournament? "Yes there is," says head coach Kelly Sopak. "After winning so many games by large margins, this will be a good experience for us going forward."

Going very deep on his bench every game, playing several underclassmen, Sopak has been able to provide a foundation for the future, starting a freshman, two sophomores, a junior and only one senior.

Senior co-captain Clair Steele provided the leadership and ran the offense, taking charge when necessary. In

the Bishop O'Dowd game, Steele attacked the basket with abandon which was by design. According to Sopak: "In the big games, we want to get Claire rolling downhill early."

The Matadors had a balanced offense attacking inside, outside and off the fast break. A key addition during the season was Jordyn Bryant who proved to be a real force on offense and off the boards.

Maintaining a steady demeanor and composure on the court has become a trademark of Sopak's players: "That's true. I try and set that example for them and make it clear to them that the most important thing is that they play hard."

If there is a specious way to look at the loss to Bishop O'Dowd, had Miramonte won their game, which would have been their 16th straight win, they would have had to have won 21 games to win the state tournament. Now they only have to win five games in a row.

With Campolindo making it into the third round of the playoffs and qualifying for the state tournament, head coach Art Thoms took great satisfaction in what was a season that had as many injuries as a MASH unit.

In spite of this, the Cougars found a way to overcome the loss of so many key players. With co-captain Kailey Meyer, Kiana Thorson, out with an ankle injuries and second leading scorer Ashley Thoms lost with a wrist injury, Thoms said: "There was a lot of adversity we had to deal with and the girls reacted to it very well. It's been important for the kids to learn how to deal with tough times. This is the most resilient team I have had. To see them step in and improve has been really rewarding."

Ironically, Thoms maybe took the most pride in the teams third round playoff loss to Salesian College Prep (53-44). So short-handed, with two additional players out sick, Campolindo had to bring up five girls from the junior varsity. It wasn't easy according to Thoms: "We had to have a Saturday practice with just the JV girls and they all played. To only lose by nine points under these conditions, the effort from the team was impressive. Not to be overlooked, if that is possible, was the play of senior and Washington bound, Haley Van Dyke who took on even more responsibility. In the playoff win over Moreau Catholic (73-50), Van Dyke scored 60 points, 54 in the last three quarters, the third highest total scored among Northern California girl players.

Complimenting Van Dyke's play was senior co-captain Grace McGuire described by Thoms as "our team leader vocally. She played great against Salesian. Sara White was another player that came up big and was fantastic on defense."

With Meyer returning from her injury, Mariella Crudele's outside shooting and the development of sophomore point guard Kate Brown, Thoms finds real satisfaction with his players: "This team really gets

along better than any other kids I have ever had. There have been no issues. It's the tightest group I have ever had."

Acalanes head coach Michelle Sasaki headed into the season with a very young team. On top of that, the Dons lost two key players to injuries, senior Olivia Toth and sophomore Kaylee Pond. Still Acalanes finished with a 16-11 season (11-6-non league and 5-5 in league play, finishing third behind Miramonte and Campolindo).

Says Sasaki: "I thought the season was challenging but it much exceeded my expectations for such a young team. We had all new starters in a highly competitive league. In January we were down to six players and yet we continued to win half our games. This was a very gritty group that did a nice job in valuing the process."

Freshmen Gaby Schneider and Grace Gebhardt laid the foundation for the team. With so many underclassmen playing this season, Sasaki sees the positive: "For the young kids to get so much playing time each game, will prove to be invaluable next year. It's experience you can't get in practice."

With the maturation of the young players and the return of Pond next season, Sasaki remains optimistic: "All the girls did a great job and if they commit to the team, they can be successful at the varsity level. I'm hope to see if we can get more numbers out for the team."



Photo Gint Federas

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