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Lamorinda girls basketball preview

By Jon Kingdon



Mia Mastro Photos Gint Federas

There are two things that the Lamorinda girls basketball teams all have in common as we go to print. They all made the playoffs this year and each of the coaches is terribly frustrated at the inability to practice due to everyone's least favorite words - air quality index. There is one substantial change in the Diablo Foothill League this year - Miramonte has left the league to go independent. This will allow Miramonte to play a more competitive schedule and it will provide, for the first time in a number of years, a greater opportunity for the rest of the teams to win the league.

Acalanes head coach Michelle Sasaki led the Dons to a 16-11 record last season even though the team was shorthanded through most of the season, at one point having to play a game with only six players.

Having lost only two players to graduation, this is going to be a much more mature team. Sasaki is very positive about their prospects: "I really like this team. As a group, they are really trying hard to get better and to embrace the process. There is a lot of positive energy and it has been an enjoyable team to coach."

Gabby Schneider and Grace Gebhardt, coming off top freshman seasons, are being counted on to be the foundation for the team. Sasaki believes the strength of the team is its overall balance: "Our guards can all shoot and our posts can handle the ball and shoot the threes. They can play inside and outside. Teams won't be able to just key on any one player on the team. We will be able to put five players on the court that can all contribute. We've improved our range with a lot of good work in the offseason."

Juniors Lauren Kobashigawa and Lauren Frechman, both excellent three-point shooters, will again be counted on to complement the team's inside game. Says Sasaki: "A lot of our players have different strengths and they all complement each other. Our offense will start inside with Grace and Gabby and we will also have the ability to score from the outside."

There are three new additions to Acalanes this year: Junior Kaylee Pond, who missed all last season with knee surgery is coming along well and should be ready for the team's league games; freshman Michelle Goll, who did very well in the team's summer program, earning a spot on the varsity; and Daphne Gantner, who was promoted from last year's JV team and should see a fair amount of playing time as well.

Though still limited in numbers and with only one senior on the roster, Kate Schirmer, Sasaki is optimistic about her team: "Depth is our main concern and the biggest challenge is for us to manage it and it can be an advantage. With only nine players on the roster, they all will contribute to the team. Everyone has a lot of responsibility and they understand that we lack the luxury of having a bad day on the court. We have a lot of tough games scheduled prior to our league play. Our league is wide open this year. All of our games are going to be close and fun and it is going to make for an interesting season."

The Don's first home game is scheduled for Nov. 28 and over Christmas will be playing in the West Coast Jamboree tournament.

Miramonte head coach Kelly Sopak is excited about the new challenges his team will be facing: "This is something that we have been working on for a number of years. Having had so much success over so many years, we met the criteria to make this change. This allows us to always get competitive games and it will allow the other teams in the league to play for the championship." So far the only regret that Sopak has had was "having to learn what AQI (air quality index) stands for."

Despite making it to the state semifinals last year, Sopak broke down what went wrong with his team from every perspective: "We had a number of one-on-one meetings with our players and coaches to figure out what caused our lack of success at the end of last season and to determine how to work things out on the court and with our coaching. We have hit the ground running this fall and I've been pleasantly surprised at how far along we were prior to the fires."

Junior Amerika De Los Santos will be the team's point guard, replacing Claire Steele. Says Sopak: "Amerika is a good kick starter for the team. She had a great off season and is taking on the load." Sophomore Mia Mastrov had an excellent freshman year averaging 7.5 points and 4.6 rebounds and is being counted on by

Sopak: "Mia has really blossomed. She is coming into her own and has great potential to be a star."

Never lacking in depth, Sopak has brought up four players from last year's JV team: Katlin Miller, Julia Miller, Katrina Schrittwieser and Jennifer Tierney. Sopak utilized what he calls his swing team to ease the players' transition to the varsity: "These four kids would practice with the varsity but play with the JV so they are familiar with our culture and the program."

Sophomores Erin Tarasow (10.1) and Rebecca Welsh (6.9) should continue to improve and the team's only senior on the roster, Emily Houston (4.2), who missed the summer program due to knee surgery, has made a great rehab, according to Sopak: "Emily looks 100 percent healthy. You can see the spring back in her step and she looks good playing the wing and the post. Our main shooters are back and a year older."

Some things never change. "We'll still have the same pressing defense and we will be playing at a faster pace than last year," says Sopak. "We may be a smaller team but we are going to be playing a lot more five out offense. We are going to have five scorers on the court at all times."

Sopak is trying to address the team's lack of size on the boards: "We are working hard to concentrate on rebounding though we lack some size. Everyone is on board working to be able to rebound as a team."

As an independent team, Miramonte will be playing in nine different tournaments: The La Jolla Sweet 16, The Elite Showcase at Chabot College, The John Peyo Mats Tip Off Classic, the Steve Geramoni Classic, the West Coast Jamboree, the Matt Demming Classic and the Elite Is Earned Invitational, the MLK Showcase and the Lamorinda Classic.

Sopak appreciates how this schedule works to the team's advantage: "The best part of it is that once the season starts, we only play on one school day. We will be playing every Saturday and will be able to schedule some off days during the week."

When a team graduates five of their top six scorers, a new head coach may claim that they did not know what they were getting into. Campolindo head coach Matthew Kirby can not make that claim, having been Cougars JV coach the past seven years.

With so many new players on the varsity, Kirby's first goal has been to get the team working together: "The girls who have returned and the ones that played on JV last season are getting comfortable in their expanded roles. With so many players on the JV team that got playoff experience last season, it has eased the transition to the varsity and they know what they need to do this year."

Junior co-captain Kate Brown will be the team's point guard and is being counted on to lead the team on the floor: "Kate has taken great strides as a leader," says Kirby. "Last year, after losing Ashley Thoms to injury, Kate got a lot of experience. She can be a top player. Running our offense, she is our most important player. She'll be the stick stirring the drink."

Besides Brown, there is a lot of depth in the team's back court according to Kirby: "Our guard play is going to be a strength. We have a lot of returners there and it is helping to stabilize the team."

There are a number of young players that are still trying to learn where they fit on the roster. Sophomores Meg Larson and Emily Marsten, new to the team, are still trying to establish their spots, says Kirby: "Meg and Emily have shown a lot of potential but it is going to take a while for them to get used to the varsity and seeing what their roles will be."

Kiana Thorson appeared in 26 games last season as a freshman, scoring 4.1 points a game. She is another player whose position was not defined last year but is being counted on to be a strong contributor this season.

Senior co-captain, Mariella Crudelle is a key for the Cougars offense, says Kirby: "Mariella is our key offensive person on the perimeter. She is a very good 3-point shooter."

Another co-captain, Sarah White is the leader on the defense. "Sara played very well last season when she was called up for the playoffs. Her defense was a real key for the team and the same is expected of her this season."

Zoe Crouch is the team's fourth co-captain and they have all done their part in pulling the team together, says Kirby: "Off the court, they're a great group of girls. They played together a lot over the summer. They all get along. I feel they have a chip on their shoulders because there is not a lot expected of them and they want to prove people wrong."

Campolindo will be playing in four tournaments: the Marin Catholic Lady Cat Classic, the Paris Twins Classic, the West Coast Jamboree and the Lamorinda Classic. Kirby welcomes the challenge for his team: "Our schedule is going to be tougher this season and we will be playing a lot of tough teams. With Miramonte dropping out of the league, it's going to be a more balanced league. The teams are fairly equal so everyone is going to have to be ready to play each night."



Amerika De Los Santos

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