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Lamorinda boys basketball preview

By Jon Kingdon



Ian Archer

Photos Gint Federas



Carter Mahaney

Last season, Acalanes, Campolindo and Miramonte could lay claim to having played in the toughest division – the Diablo-Football league. The combined record for all three schools in league play was 8-22, but their record in nonleague games was 38-19 with Acalanes and Campolindo both making it to the state tournament.

Having graduated 12 of the 13 players from last year's roster, Acalanes head coach Sol Henik is basically starting from scratch with one exception. The one returning player, senior point guard Ian Archer, who became a starter last year due to an injury, gained great experience and will be a key in the transition. Says Henik: "We expect a lot of scoring from Ian and for him to lead the younger players on the team."

Last year's team had what Henik described as a "football mentality." It's a new group with a new attitude, according to Henik: "We have a number of players jockeying for playing time which will determine how we identify ourselves. This year's team has a higher basketball IQ. They understand the offense with its spacing and cutting. There is a hunger on the squad and they are all very coachable kids that love to play basketball."

The Dons are not lacking for size in the front court. Jackson Kirke, a 6'6" senior, opted not to play last season, concentrating on water polo is a welcome addition at center. Says Henik: "Jackson plays hard and has a nice shot. He understands the game and with his experience in water polo, knows the spacing and angles on the court. He brings good toughness and is not afraid to bang with anyone. 6'5" sophomore Austin Kinnear has come over from the volleyball team bringing a great work ethic and competitiveness. He really wants to get better." Juniors 6'4" John Kalil and 6'3" Aiden Bodner will both bring toughness, effort and depth.

Sophomore guard Scott Ruegg played in the NCS playoff game last season and is playing beyond his years, says Henik: "Scott has a very high basketball IQ and is fundamentally sound. He has emerged as a leader, always the first to practice and the last to leave. He can be a top scorer." Another sophomore, Joe Carillo, is being counted on to be the inside scorer at power forward.

Henik feels strong about the team's overall defense: "We have a very good foundation and fundamentals with great communication and talking between the players." Senior Clark King is expected to be the key player on defense with his athleticism and man coverage ability.

Without any one dominant player, Henik appreciates the character of his team: "The strength of this team is how well they are playing together and sharing the ball. It's a very un-selfish bunch. I've been amazed at how many guys will pass up a shot for a better shot by a teammate. For us to be successful, we have to share the ball and play together."

Acalanes opens the season with tournaments in San Rafael and Amador Valley and will then play their first home game on Dec. 11 versus Santa Rosa. They will then play tournaments in El Cerrito and in the Chris Huber Classic. Says Henik: "I enjoy the tournaments plus it's a toughening up process which is important as we are in such a competitive league."

Campolindo head coach Steven Dyer, entering his third year as the team's head coach, has been affiliated with the league since 2003 when he participated as a player, and has never seen the league so competitive with no sign that there will be a let up this year.

The Cougars are returning only two starters, senior David Ahazie and junior Carter Mahaney. Says Dyer: "Both David and Carter are good leaders. We are going to lean on them a lot." Mahaney (13.9) and Ahazie (13.2) were the two leading scorers on last year's team.

As the team's point guard for the third straight year, Mahaney is very much in charge on the floor. Dyer is particularly impressed in how Ahazie has worked this off season: "David is a very underrated player. He deserves a lot of praise. He's also a good defender and his really improved his game this off season."

Dyer is counting on two freshmen, Aiden Mahaney (Carter's brother) and center Matt Raddel, the tallest player on the team, to play significant roles, but as Dyer says: "It remains to be seen when push comes to shove how well they do."

With a roster comprising four seniors, three juniors, three sophomores and two freshmen, it is fairly balanced. Sophomores Emmanuel Callas and Max Weaver and seniors Jake Chance and Ryan Jeter all saw playing time last season and are all being counted on to step up and play key and complementary roles on the team.

Dyer is looking for improved defensive play this season: "That's an area that we have been working on every day. I am looking for us to be tougher mentally than we were last year. It's important that we take ownership on the defensive end. We have to do a better job in forcing the weaker players on the opposing team to try and beat us."

Campolindo will be playing in a number of tournaments: The NorCal Tipoff Classic, the Russ Peterich, the El Cerrito Tournament, the Modesto Christian Tournament and the Martin Luther Classic at Saint Mary's College.

Dyer welcomes the challenge in playing against top competition: "We have been playing a progressively harder nonleague schedule and are glad to be invited to such elite tournament. It's very challenging but it will prepare us for league play."

Miramonte was another team that showed how competitive the Diablo Foothill League was last year. Without a win in league play,

Miramonte was 9-7 against nonleague opponents.

Head coach Wayne Hunter's aim is to have his team bring a toughness and an attitude to every game: "We're going to be a scrappy team that is going to grind it out every game. We want to set the tone for each game right from the beginning."

With only six players returning from last season's roster, Hunter appreciates his team's fresh attitude: "One of the differences this year will be our toughness. Last year we did not play to our potential. This team is feeding off of each other. "With so many new players we really needed a lot of practice time but it has been limited due to the smoke issues."

Miramonte does not have a lot of size up front and it's been further limited due to the air quality. Co-captain, Matt Meredith is being counted on to be a force in the front court. However, as the quarterback for the Miramonte football team, his arrival has been delayed since the football playoffs have been postponed for two weeks. Says Hunter: "Matt has really stepped up in the off season and will give us much needed size up front. Even with Meredith, we're not a big team so we are going to have to constantly battle for rebounds."

The other co-captain, Jayson Fernbacher, will be leading the team on and off the court says Hunter: "Last season, Jason became the team's point guard and it was all new to him but he did a great job. He's our vocal leader on the floor and is the one who is holding his teammates accountable and I'm looking for him to have a top season."

As a freshman last season, Niyi Olabode was a big contributor to the team and Hunter anticipates his continuing to elevate his game: "Niyi is a top athlete and the hardest worker in our program. He's in the gym a lot and is always working on his game."

Quenton Breznikar, who will be playing wing is a good shooter and brings good toughness to the team's defense. Henry Davis should also contribute on offense with his outside shooting.

Chris Watson and Nick Watson played on the JV team last season and Hunter is looking for them to be key players on the Matador's defense: "They are both very competitive. They want to be assigned to guard our opponents top player. You'll see them diving all over the floor."

The success of coach Kelly Sopak

Sopak has been witness to many changes in the game and had the foresight to see where the game was going: "The game has changed and fortunately we were ahead of the curve when I began at Northgate. We went to the pressure defense and 3-point shooting offense and people thought that strategy was crazy and we carried that over to Miramonte playing 'small ball' but that was the evolution

of the game. We did not have the big kids and we needed to play a different style."

Yet as the game has changed, Sopak feels it's not the kids who have changed, it's the parental influence that is the difference: "The thing that we hear all the time is that kids have changed but that is not the case. It's the parents who have changed. The players are the same. Any change in them comes from

the parents, both positive and negative. Big picture wise, it goes back to the no pain-no gain philosophy that has changed. We don't treat people that way anymore, though that's not always a bad thing either. Too often as coaches, we view that as negative."

Though the winning percentage numbers have to be satisfying to Sopak, he is stepping up to a new challenge at Miramonte this sea-

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son. After winning their division so many times, Miramonte is now playing an independent schedule: "We have 26 non-league games and there isn't an easy game on the schedule which will be tough for us as a team. I love the competition. We may lose more games this season but it's okay to lose sometimes as it reveals your character."

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