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Campo girls' hoops team advances to state finals

By Karl Buscheck



The Campolindo girls basketball team.

Photos Gint Federas

When the Campolindo girls' basketball team fell in the Division 3 CIF State Championship game 62-45 to Rosary Academy, head coach Art Thoms gathered his squad to remind them of everything they had achieved.

"After the game, the girls were upset and I huddled them together," Thoms recalled of the scene at the Golden 1 Center – the home of the NBA's Sacramento Kings – on March 24. "And I said, 'Just remember the journey and all of the fun that we had during the season and the goals that we did accomplish during the season.'"

The loss to the Fullerton powerhouse, whom Max-Preps ranked as the No. 20 team in California, concluded the Cougars' campaign (27-7, 9-1) and marked just the club's second loss since the middle of January.

"Obviously, they're very talented," Thoms offered when asked to explain the team's impressive performance. "But they really played for each other."

As had been the case throughout the regular season, a triumvirate of juniors powered the Cougars through their playoff push.

"I call them the Big Three," Thoms said of the trio, consisting of Aubrey Wagner, Haley Van Dyke and Ashley Thoms.

While that group of standouts drew the most press, the Cougars were able to advance so far thanks to the help of a whole cast of contributors, beginning with junior wing Grace McGuire.

"She actually got the sportsmanship award for the finals game," Thoms said. "She was steady all year. She works hard, plays well every single game and is really a pleasure to coach."

Thoms also highlighted the contributions of junior starter Jessi O'Reilly, junior wing Kailey Meyer and sophomore wing Mariella Crudele. O'Reilly, was one of the team's captains and was the Cougars' vocal leader. Meyer, who didn't even play basketball last season, was a key cog in the rotation, and Crudele hit her stride late after an early injury threatened to derail her year.

"She really started to get back into form toward the end of the season," Thoms said. "And we look for her to make huge contributions next year."

The team's run to the California's largest stage, which also featured an NCS semifinals appearance, didn't shock the coach.

"I honestly expected to win the league, which (we did as) co-champions," Thoms said. "And I expected to make it to the state championship."

The Cougars shared the DAL National League crown with Miramonte, who tumbled out of the D2 state bracket in the regional semifinals, losing 66-65 to Vanden on March 18.

"I knew it wouldn't be easy," Thoms added. "But I really believed that and I talked about that from the first day of practice."

The inflection point for the Cougars came less than a month into the season when the team took out Salesian – the program that would eventually dump them out of the NCS tournament – 67-59 on Dec. 22 in Richmond.

"I just felt it was realistic (to make it to the state finals)," Thoms said. "I felt like we had the talent to make it there. I knew the key point would be believing that we could make it there and I think that winning the Salesian game during the season was kind of turning point. They believed that they were as good as I thought they were."



Aubrey Wagner



Haley Van Dyke



Ashley Thoms



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