

# LAMORINDA SPORTS

## Two in a Row

### Miramonte Edges Bishop O'Dowd to Win NCS Title

By Karl Buscheck



Sabrina Ionescu had 26 points in the game.

Photos Gint Federas

Miramonte held off a furious charge from Bishop O'Dowd to claim the squad's second consecutive NCS Division III crown on March 7. After building up a 22-point lead early, the Mats emerged with a 72-66 win over the Dragons in Moraga at a packed McKeon Pavilion, the home of the Saint Mary's Gaels.

Junior Sabrina Ionescu snagged the Player of the Game honors as she rained in 26 points, but it was her freshman teammate Clair Steele who saved the day. Steele racked up 20 points and hit a critical second-half three pointer, which gave the Mats some much needed breathing room after O'Dowd had cut the lead to a single point with just under three minutes to go.

"She's one of the toughest kids on our team," said head coach Kelly Sopak. "I've been fortunate to coach her since she was in the first grade so what she did today doesn't surprise me. She's a warrior."

Steele gave all the credit to her teammates: "It was a team effort and we played (great). We played as a team and we won as a team."

Early on, it was almost too easy for Miramonte. The Mats ripped off a 16-4 run to start the game and took a commanding 44-24 lead into the half. Once the teams emerged from the locker rooms, O'Dowd immediately began to climb back into the contest, reeling off a 10-0 run after the break.

As Sopak explained, his team didn't know whether to keep its foot on the gas or to play it safe after opening up a 20-point advantage.

"It's just a tough thing against a team like that because you don't want to play too aggressive and give them the ammunition to come back, but you don't want to play passive," said Sopak. "And I think we got caught

not really understanding what we wanted to do."

The Dragons continued to bridge the gap, getting the score to 58-57 late in the fourth before Steele drained the game-changing three pointer. After the final buzzer went off and the fans stormed the court, Steele was at a loss for words.

"I can't really describe it. It's just great. I've never felt like this before. It's the greatest feeling."

According to Sopak, it was

extra special to win the title against O'Dowd.

"We wanted to play last year, and circumstances were that we couldn't," said Sopak. After winning five consecutive NCS trophies, O'Dowd was disqualified from the 2014 postseason for playing an extra regular season game.

"So, our kids wanted it last year. We wanted it this year. Now that we won, I'm kind of glad that it ended the way it did."



Clair Steele had a key three pointer to help the Mats win.

## Mats, Dons Earn CIF Playoff Berths

By Conrad Bassett



Roni Marrone Photos Gint Federas



Julia Lyons

After a grueling run through the NCS playoffs, two of Lamorinda's girls' basketball teams have qualified for the upcoming California Interscholastic Federation tourna-

ment. Both Miramonte and Acalanes will fight for the state title.

Miramonte, the DFAL and NCS Division III champions, sports a 28-2 record and has qual-

ified for the Open Division playoffs as the No. 2 seed. The Open Division boasts the top teams from across all divisions. Miramonte is the only public school in the Open Division.

Head coach Kelly Sopak emphasized the Mats' accomplishment. "I told our kids that when CIF set this Open Division concept up it was not designed for a small public school like Miramonte, but due to their hard work and resolve, we are a big part of it now."

The Mats begin their quest for the state title at home on March 13 against Pinewood (Los Altos Hills). Pinewood (24-2) won the Central Coast Section Division IV championship. Pinewood looks to avenge a 73-60 Jan. 3 loss at Miramonte.

"We had a tough game against them in January and both teams have improved so it is going to be exciting," said Sopak. "I am excited that our sixth man and fans will get the opportunity to experience an Open Division playoff game." ... continued on page C3

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