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Local Powerhouses Dominate DFAL Girls' Basketball Landscape

By Karl Buscheck



Sabrina Ionescu (20) scored 39 points with 10 steals and 8 assists against the Dons.



Aubrey Wagner (10), Ashley Thoms (23) and Jordyn Bryant (33)

Photos Gint Federas

All three Lamorinda girls' basketball programs are flooded with talent, but right now, there's no match for the Miramonte Mats.

"We've got a once in a lifetime team here at Miramonte," head coach Kelly Sopak declared after his team dismantled its local rivals – Acalanes and Campolindo – by a combined score of 184-84 in the opening week of DFAL play. "I don't know if we'll ever be this good again. And I think you've got to take advantage of it."

After drubbing Acalanes 89-34 on Jan. 5 at home and cruising past Campolindo 95-50 on Jan. 8 in Moraga, the Mats have now reeled of 52 DFAL wins in a row and sit at 12-0 on the season and 2-0 in league.

Sabrina Ionescu, whom ESPN tabbed as the fourth-best senior recruit in the nation, is the star of the show. But Miramonte didn't climb to the No. 6 spot in USA Today's Super

25 national rankings by having just one name on the marquee.

The supporting cast includes senior Uriah Howard who is headed to Eastern Washington, senior Keana Delos Santos who will be suiting up for Utah Valley State next year and sophomore Clair Steele and junior Elle Louie.

Sopak's team has risen to national prominence thanks in part to a daunting non-league schedule. On Jan. 16, the Mats will travel to Stockton to take part in the MLK Showcase, which will also feature heavyweights like Mater Dei and the hosts, St. Mary's, who dumped the Mats out of the CIF Open Division NorCal regional finals last spring.

Like the reigning NCS Division III champion Mats, Campo also has lofty objectives for the season.

"Some of our team goals are to win 20 games, make NCS and also

the NorCal playoffs," head coach Art Thoms said. "Those are our three major, long-term goals."

Haley Van Dyke will play a crucial role in achieving those goals, as the sophomore leads the Cougars in points per game (17.1), rebounds (13.2) and assists 4.6. Sophomores Ashley Thoms and Jessi O'Reilly rank second in scoring and rebounds, respectively, but it's an upperclassman who represents the team's true heartbeat.

"This group of girls really cares and supports each other," Thoms said. "We also have great enthusiasm at practice every day. Senior Captain Emily Lyall has done a great job leading the group."

As the DFAL season ramps up, the Cougars can't help but look ahead to their Jan. 22 meeting with Acalanes in Lafayette.

"The kids and coaches are very familiar with each other," Thoms

said. "Both teams are evenly matched, which makes for a great competitive local game."

It's also the kind of matchup that can serve as a valuable learning experience for both sides.

"You look at teams like Miramonte, Campolindo, Dublin, Dougherty Valley," Acalanes head coach Chad Wellon said. "We're going to have tough competitive games in league, which I think is a good preparation piece for going into the postseason."

The league season will be a grind, but ultimately it's all just building toward the postseason.

"The big picture is the playoffs," Wellon explained. "So, obviously, always league is important to us, but really we're approaching league as like a stepping stone. As a program, we're hoping that we can make a deep run into the playoffs – both from an NCS perspective and a Nor-

Cal perspective."

On Jan. 8 in Lafayette, the Dons throttled Las Lomas 91-15 to improve league mark to 1-1 and the team's overall record sits at 12-3 after Acalanes edged Elk Grove 64-58 in the Pittsburgh Shootout on Jan. 9.

For Acalanes, all those wins have been the product of a true team effort.

"Emma [Godfrey] and Brooke Panfili have carried the load from a scoring perspective and they've been really consistent there," Wellon said of the juniors. "[But] really my starting five, Julia Lyons and Taylor Jones from a defensive perspective have done incredibly. And Roni Marrone is our player that can play every position. She can play point guard. She can play the five spot."

And then there's senior three-point specialist Alex Grant-Hudd, who Wellon said "has been [a] huge" part of the team's success.

Boys' Basketball: High Hopes, but Work to do as DFAL Play Begins

By Karl Buscheck



University of Oregon commit Eddy Ionescu (4) leads the Mats' offense.

Photo Gint Federas

Rivalry games highlighted week one of the DFAL boys' basketball slate. On Jan. 8 in Moraga, Campolindo took down Miramonte 65-55 thanks to a double-double from senior center Sterling Strothers and some lights-out fourth-quarter shooting from one Cougar who wasn't even supposed to be on the court.

Following the team's 65-56 loss to Las Lomas on Jan. 5, the win over the Mats evened Campo's league mark at 1-1. The team pushed its overall record to 7-8 a day later by beating St. Mary's of Stockton 57-48 at home.

The win against Miramonte also gives the Cougars temporary bragging rights over their neighbor, which always means something extra for the players.

"I think it does for the team," head coach Kearey Smith said. "But

for me, I'm just looking for consistency from my team right now. We've had a lot of games – injuries kind of hurt us a little bit – we let a lot of games go that I feel we should have won if we showed up."

In the third quarter, the Mats cut the deficit to just three points, after senior Ryan Anderson stole the ball in transition and slammed home the dunk, but Miramonte never managed to level the score – much less grab a lead.

"They came with focus and energy," Smith said of his players. "That was the difference in this game."

Drew McDonald, the head coach of the Mats, echoed that sentiment, praising the performance of the hosts when asked to explain what the missing ingredient was for Miramonte.

"They were much tougher than we were," McDonald said. "They're

a mentally tougher team than we are right now in the season."

Campolindo was also far more dangerous from beyond the arc – that was especially true for captain Austin Clark who was playing at less than 100 percent.

"Austin is on limited minutes. A minutes restriction (because of) a bad injury," Smith said of the senior forward, who sank a pair of fourth-quarter threes to foil Miramonte's late charge. "I wasn't going to let him play, but he's a fire guy. He's a leader on the team."

As Campolindo embarks upon the league campaign, the focus isn't on reaching a certain win total or advancing to a specific stage in the postseason, but rather on playing up to a simple motto.

"Consistency and effort. Those are the two things I think I need to see

from these guys," Smith said. "Everything else will take care of itself, but if we get consistency and effort, I feel the team will have an awesome opportunity and hopefully we can go deep in DFAL."


The Mats (11-5 overall, 1-1 in league) also have intentions of angling for the DFAL crown, but the setback against Campo served as a reminder that there is plenty that needs to be improved.

"We are hoping to compete for a league title," McDonald said. "I think that this team is a work in progress.

We have growth to do in front of us and that's the challenge for us – we need to grow."

While the team's first week of DFAL action ended on a disappointing note, the league opener on Jan. 5 couldn't have been more promising. With senior and Oregon commit Eddy Ionescu leading the way, the Mats smashed past Acalanes 77-41 at home. That clash gave the Dons a first-hand look at just how challenging it will be to contend for the top spot in league.

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