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Lamorinda Girls Keep Their Seasons Alive With Strong NCS Finishes

By Karl Buscheck



The Lady Mats won their third-consecutive NCS Division III title on Saturday and earned the No. 2 seed in the CIF Open Division tournament Photos Gint Federas

include clashes with heavyweights like Archbishop Mitty - the No. 12 ranked team in the country - in the regional semifinals, and the nation's best team, St. Mary's (Stockton), in the NorCal finals.

"With the Open Division, you just know there's bigger obstacles ahead," Sopak said. "So, you try not to look ahead - you've got to take it one game at a time - but I just know the teams are going to be tougher as we go forward."

Against the Dragons at McKeon Pavilion - the home floor of the St. Mary's Gaels - the Mats' trademark uptempo style was on full display. Miramonte raced out to a 19-8 advantage after the first quarter and took a 52-27 lead into the half.

The No. 1 seed Mats stumbled early in the third, failing to sink a bucket in the first four minutes of the quarter, but still ended up coasting past the No. 2 seed.

In the Division II final on March 4, Acalanes couldn't keep up with top-seeded Carondelet, falling 68-42 to MaxPrep's No. 32 team in the state.

Despite the loss at McKeon, head coach Chad Wellon was thrilled with his team's play from the very first non-conference contest to the last postseason showdown.

"[I'm] very proud [of the team]," Wellon said. "We had an extremely tough non-league schedule and I really think that helped us get to the point where we're at right now - along with how tough our league is."

The No. 2 seed Dons - one of four DFAL teams to advance to the NCS semifinals - dug a deep hole early on against Carondelet, trailing 49-22 at the half. After the break, Acalanes roared out of the

The Miramonte girls' basketball team secured its third consecutive NCS Division III title on March 5, throttling Bishop O'Dowd 82-67.

But fiercer tests await the 29-0 squad.

"I'll enjoy the boys [championship] game and then we're back [at it]," head coach Kelly Sopak explained, as his team gets set for yet another CIF State tournament run.

After contributing 24 points, 14 rebounds and seven assists to the NCS win, senior star Sabrina Ionescu echoed her coach's sentiment.

"I'm already thinking about the next game," the All-American declared.

That next game comes against Brookside Christian at home on March 11, when the Mats begin their state run. While the Mats will be heavy favorites in their first tilt, a run deep into state will likely

locker room, outscoring their opponents in the third quarter 11-6.

Even with its encouraging start to the second half, the early deficit ultimately proved insurmountable for Acalanes.

In the defeat, junior guard Brooke Panfili, who along with junior forward Emma Godfrey, has been one of the stalwarts throughout the campaign, led the team with 11 points. The Dons also received yet another boost from a third emerging star.

"The player who really has stepped up here in the playoffs who's played amazing who's averaged close to 14 [points] a game for us is Roni Marrone," Wellon said of the junior forward who chipped in nine points against Cardondelet. "She's really playing her best basketball right now, which was huge - we needed kind of that third player, in terms of scoring, to step up."

For the Dons - 21-9 overall and 6-6 in DFAL - a simple approach fueled the push into the NCS final.

"My message is just, 'have fun, enjoy the moment.' " Wellon explained. "And hopefully that's what's resonated and that's what the girls have been doing because really at the end of the day, that's what it's all about."

After their runner-up finish on Friday, the Lady Dons earned the No. 5 seed in the CIF Division II tournament, and are set to play No. 12 Elk Grove at home on March 9. The Campolindo Lady Cougars earned a berth in the CIF Division III tournament after losing to Bishop O'Dowd in the NCS semi finals last week. The Cougars earned a first round bye and will face the winner of No. 11 South San Francisco and No. 6 Tamalpais on March 12.



Clair Steele (3)



Keana Delos Santos (11) and Elle Louie (13)

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