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Lady Mats Advance to State Championship

By Karl Buscheck

Thanks to an onslaught of three pointers from Sabrina Ionescu and Claire Steele, Miramonte dismantled Pinewood 73-40 to claim the Open Division CIF Girls NorCal title on March 19 at the Sleep Train Arena in Sacramento.

"We're a three-point shooting team," head coach Kelly Soak declared after Ionescu and Steele combined to rain in nine strikes from beyond the arc. "That's what we do. That's what we practice."

The next challenge for MaxPrep's No. 5 team in the nation will be running up against Chaminade – the third-ranked team in the country – in a return trip to Sacramento on March 26. The West Hills powerhouse arrived in the State Championship after edging past Long Beach Poly 50-49 in the SoCal Final courtesy of a buzzer-beating three pointer.

Against Pinewood, Ionescu ended the night with 29 points and 14 rebounds while Steele chipped in 14 – all in the first half. Afterward Steele, whose lights-out shooting powered the Mats to a 35-14 advantage at the break, lavished praise on the rest of the squad.

"My teammates made really great passes to me," the sophomore said after the NorCal champs improved to 32-0. "So, I think if you make a great pass, then you deserve the assist."

As Sopak explained, it was the team's tireless work on defense that unlocked the relentless offense.

"I just think our ability to defend today was phenomenal," Sopak said. "We just went out and defended. And when you can defend and when you can make teams have to work so hard to score, offensively we're going to do what we're going to do."

Instead of running their trademark full-court press, Sopak dialed up a man-to-man defensive scheme to stifle the Panthers.

"We took dignity in playing man. We're a really good man-to-man team or woman-to-woman," the All-Amer-



As time expires, the Lady Mats celebrate their NorCal state final breakthrough against Pinewood. Jessie Wilson (21) Keana De Los Santos (11) Sabrina Ionescu (20) Jordyn Bryant (33) Clair Steele (3) Lauren Sopak (23) Uriah Howard (12) Photos Gint Federas

ican Ionescu cracked. "We made shooters not shoot and drivers not drive. And we took care of business."

In each of the past two seasons, the Mats have failed to take care of business at Sleep Train Arena, as the team bowed out of the State tournament in the regional finals in back-to-back campaigns.

"We've had some tough losses here and – one of the things last year when we lost – we made a pact we were coming back," Sopak said. "We were determined to get back here. We got here and we wanted to win this year. And that's what we did."

Last March, St. Mary's of Stockton mowed down the Mats 67-52 in Sacramento. This time around, Miramonte never got a chance to take on the top team in the nation after Pinewood upset St. Mary's 72-69 in the

semifinal.

"I think we all kind of wanted a shot at St. Mary's – to get back [at them] for last year," Ionescu admitted. "But, it kind of matters who finishes on top, not who you beat. So, we're happy we beat Pinewood."

While soaking in his team's first NorCal title, Sopak credited Pinewood for dumping the powerhouse Rams out of the postseason.

"You get a St. Mary's Stockton – whoever beats them and knocks them out of the bracket that's a good thing if you want to try to win it. So, Pinewood did the work for us. So that was great," Sopak said. "They don't judge you by how easy the path was or how hard the path was as long as you make it through the path and I think that's what we really did a good job [of]."



Lady Mats pose with their CIF NorCal championship plaque and first-place medals.



Senior Uriah Howard scored 11 points in the NorCal final. Howard will play at Eastern Washington University next winter.



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