

LAMORINDA SPORTS

Lady Mats' Historic Run Ends in State Title Game

By Karl Buscheck



Senior Keana Delos Santos's three pointer gave the Mats a 53-51 lead with 1:32 left in the third quarter Photos Gint Federas

Despite a furious third-quarter charge, the Lady Mats came up short in their quest for the school's first state title and perfect season, losing 80-71 to Chaminade in the CIF Open Division championship at Sleep Train Arena on March 26.

"It was a good run. It was a tough run," head coach Kelly Sopak said after his team dug out of a 20-point hole to briefly claim a third-quarter lead over the West Hills heavyweights - MaxPrep's No. 3 team in the nation. "And I thought we had them and it goes that way, but it's not going to change who these kids are - what we are defined by as a team. We're a tough hard-working group of players whether we win or lose and unfortunately it didn't work out."

The Mats (32-1), famous for their supercharged starts, endured a nightmare beginning of the night in the state capital, falling behind 23-11 by the end of the first quarter. MaxPrep's fifth-ranked team in the country was staring at a 43-33 deficit heading into the half, though they captured the momentum thanks to an unreal shot from Sabrina Ionescu to close the half.

In the closing seconds of the second quarter, junior Elle Louie ripped a rebound away from Chaminade and passed to the All-American who banked in a 35-foot buzzer-beating three pointer which not only ignited the crowd at the Sacramento Kings arena but also ignited Miramonte's second-half

comeback attempt.

While the long-run effort was Ionescu's only three ball of the night, the senior's triple-double - 24 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists - fueled the Mats second-half comeback. Miramonte outscored Chaminade 22-14 in the third quarter and even briefly took the lead, 53-51, with 1:32 to go in the third when senior Keana Delos Santos rained in a three pointer from the corner.

Ultimately, the Mats offered a towering Chaminade squad too many second chances.

"They outrebounded [us] on the offensive end - I think they were two to one on the offensive rebounds," Sopak said, after the Eagles dominated the offensive glass 19-11. "And I think that was something we needed to shore up that we didn't. We gave them too many easy looks for offensive put-backs. If we could have a couple of those back, we'd be a little happier right now."

In the final quarter, those second chances caught up to the Mats. Chaminade scored 23 points in the fourth, as the Eagles secured their second state title in three seasons.

"You have to exert a lot of energy to come back from 20," Sopak explained. "We got on a run there in the third quarter, and we just couldn't weather that last storm."

The Mats' first and only loss brought a disappointing end to a spectacular season in which the Mats flirted with both the state

and national titles, a massive accomplishment for any school, but especially a Division III program drawing from less than 1,400 students. In fact, the storybook season managed to even exceed the expectations of their star player.

"I didn't think a team like us could make it this far," Ionescu admitted on stage in the Sleep Train Arena's pressroom, flanked by her teammates. "We had our doubts throughout the season but we stuck to it. You know, we listened to our coaches. We worked as hard as anybody's worked in practice and took every game like it was our last."

Editor's Note: Last week, Lady Mats star Sabrina Ionescu participated in the McDonald's All-America Game (Chicago, Ill.) and not only earned the Jack Daly Sportsmanship Award, but also earned game MVP, scoring 25 points - a new record - and leading the West to a second-half comeback victory.



Senior Sabrina Ionescu made a half-court shot as time expired in the first half, shifting the momentum in the Mats' favor



The Ionescu family - from left: Dan, Sabrina, Liliana Butas and Eddy - pose for a photo at the McDonald's All-America Game award banquet.

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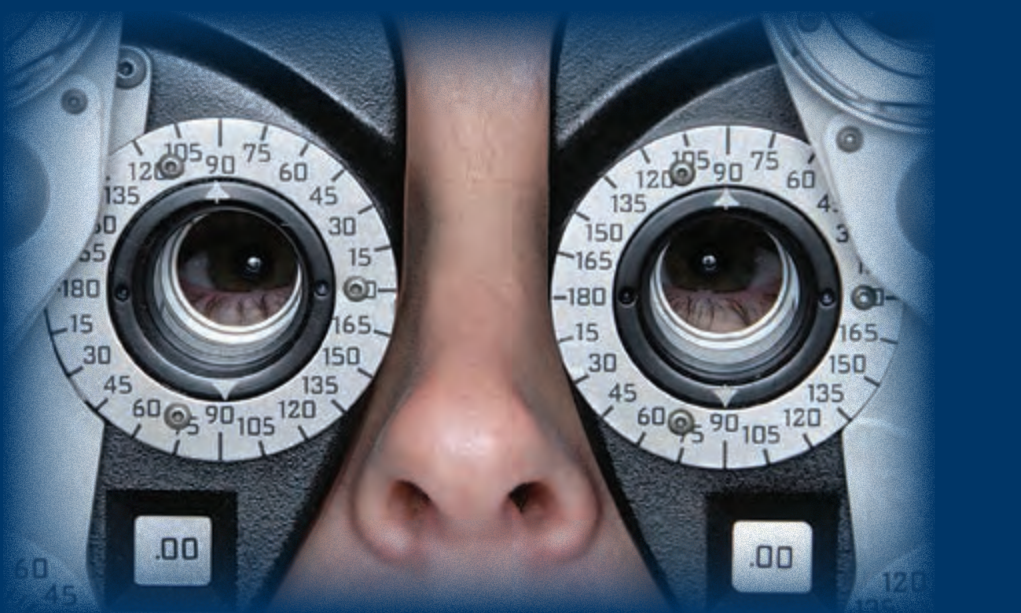


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