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Campo girls' basketball grabs spot in state title game

By Karl Buscheck



Photo Gint Federas

The Campolindo girls' basketball team clinched a berth in the D3 state championship, taking down No. 4 Saint Mary's of Berkeley, 78-56, on March 18 in the CIF Northern regional title game.

In the win on the Cougars' home floor in Moraga, the second-seed got a 46-point, 20-rebound performance from junior Haley Van Dyke. Next on the docket for Campolindo is a trip to the Golden 1 Center in Sacramento on March 24 to face off against No. 1 seed Rosary Academy of Fullerton - MaxPrep's No. 21 team in California.

For the Cougars, who shared DAL National Conference title with the Mats, the win over Saint Mary's marks the latest high-water point for the team.

"As the season has progressed we have continued to get a lot tougher each week," head coach Art Thoms said. "During these very competitive games we want to win the 50/50 balls. Those are rebounds or balls on the ground that both teams have a chance to secure. We want to win that battle."

The Cougars flew through the opening two rounds of NorCals, cruising past No. 15 Placer and No. 7 San Marin by a combined margin of 44 points. During the run, Thoms has focused on building solidarity within the group - and also making sure the players stop to appreciate their achievements.

"We are in this together," said Thoms. "Stick together during the tough times and enjoy the success not as individuals, but as a team. Also to continue to work hard, but enjoy the memories we are creating."

While the Cougars (27-6, 9-1 in league) were victorious in the DIII NorCal regional finals, Miramonte fell in the DII title matchup. The Mats' 66-65 loss to top-seeded Vanden in Fairfield brings an end to the team's 30-4 season (9-1 in league). The game also marked the fourth year in a row - and the fifth time in six seasons - that the Mats have competed in a NorCal finals.

"Our message does not change," head coach Kelly Sopak explained before the No. 2 seed Mats lost to Vanden. "One-game winning streak. That is and will always be our mantra. We also talk about fight. Fight to be our best every day. Fight to uphold our system and process and most importantly fight for one another."

After securing the NCS DII crown, the Mats opened up NorCals by throttling No. 15 Whitney, 83-40, in the opening round and dispatching No. 7 Elk Grove and No. 3 Valley Christian in the second round and semifinals, respectively.

In the 69-63 win over Valley Christian on March 14, Clair Steele dropped 34 points, as the junior point guard sank five 3-pointers. Along with senior wing and fellow captain Elle Louie, Steele was the Mats top standout during the postseason push.

Sopak is plenty familiar with the pair of stars, having coached Steele for 11 years and Louie for 10. The duo also helped set the tone for the roster at large.

"Quite simply the players (have led the way)," Sopak said. "Our culture is based on our system and our process. The players have bought in from day one and are now reaping the benefits of their hard work."

The Dons, who also took part in the DII bracket, exited in the opening round on March 8. Finishing with a 19-11 record overall (6-4 in league), the No. 11 seed Dons fell 70-41 on the road to No. 6 Modesto Christian.

"Overall, we had an amazing season, one to be proud of," head coach Ashley Valenzuela said after piloting the Dons to a NorCal berth in her debut season in Lafayette. "One of our team slogans is 'Leave a Legacy.' I think we succeeded in doing that, our seniors have really left an avenue for continued success of this program."

Before the NorCal loss, the program had advanced to the NCS DII semifinals and earned the No. 3 spot in the standings of the DAL National Conference. Throughout the season, the Dons leaned heavily on their triumvirate of senior stars, consisting of Emma Godfrey, Brooke Panfili and Roni Marroni.

"The key to our success was our ability to overcome adversity," Valenzuela said. "We had a tough season with illness and injuries and despite that we were still able to have a great run deep into playoffs."

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[back](#)

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