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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 post-season 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."

Saint Mary's exits Big Dance following 2nd-round loss to Arizona Wildcats

By Karl Buscheck



Jock Landale

Photo Tod Fierner

Since the fall of 2013, the Saint Mary's Gaels have made a tradition of meeting the Arizona Wildcats for an annual preseason scrimmage.

The men's basketball program squared off with the Pac-12 kingpins for three falls in a row before a scheduling conflict forced the Cats to scratch this season's exhibition. Instead, the teams had to wait until the second round of the NCAA tournament, when Arizona toppled Saint Mary's, 69-60, on March 18 at Vivint Smart Home Arena in Salt Lake City.

"These guys really knew how Saint Mary's was," Arizona head coach Sean Miller told The Associated Press. "In a small way, (the scrimmages) really helped us tonight."

The Saint Mary's loss, which pushed Arizona into the regional semifinals of the Big Dance, denied the Gaels their first trip to the Sweet 16 since 2010 when future NBA champ Matthew Dellavedova was just a freshman and still early

on in the process of re-writing the school's record book.

Ending the year with 29-5 record (16-2 West Coast Conference play), the Gaels actually commanded a 30-29 lead at the break and clung to a two-point advantage – 46-44 – nine minutes into the second half.

"I look at this as one of the great wins we've had in the tournament because of the team that we beat," Miller said, per The AP.

Ultimately, Saint Mary's characteristically lights-out long-range shooting – the team had shot 40 percent from distance entering the contest – deserted the squad. While it was Arizona who was ice cold in the first half (1-for-7 on 3-pointers), Saint Mary's managed to hit just five of its 21 triples (24 percent) on the night.

6-foot-11 junior center Jock Landale produced his second double-double in as many tournament games, totaling 19 points and 11 rebounds. Junior forward Calvin Hermanson was second on the

team with 14 points – even as he connected on just two of his nine shots from beyond the arc.

The Gaels advanced to their second-round meeting with their erstwhile scrimmage partner after dispatching the No. 10 seed Virginia Commonwealth, 85-77, on March 16 at Vivint Smart Home Arena.

In the opening-round win, Landale, who paced Saint Mary's in scoring and rebounds throughout the season, went for a team-high 18 points and 13 boards.

On a night when the Gaels shot 64 percent from the field in the opening half, including a 23-6 burst, Hermanson and senior guard Joe Rahon both chipped in 16 points.

After the frenetic start, VCU rallied late, cutting the deficit to six points, 83-77, with 31 seconds left on the clock before the Gaels secured the win.

"They're hard to put away," head coach Randy Bennett told The AP. "We're happy to get this one done."

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