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## Lamorinda girls basketball face hurdles heading into league play

By Jon Kingdon



Haley Van Dyke Photo Gint Federas

Coming off a season where Campolindo made it to the state finals, head coach Art Thoms, having lost only one player to graduation, had to be optimistic about his team's prospects until confronted with a series of injuries and a number of girls who opted to compete in other sports. Thoms summed it up simply: "We're leaking oil."

Having recently lost senior co-captain, guard Ashley Thoms (who will be playing at Weber State next season) to a broken wrist after averaging 19.1 points per game, coach Thomas has been forced to juggle his personnel: "We have tried to figure out what is best for each girl and the team. It has taken time to figure that out and it has gone on during the season. We are just starting to figure it out as the league games are beginning." With a 9-6 record, heading into league play, Thoms has kept his team's eye on the prize: "We're playing for March and focusing on the league. This is a special group of eight kids that get along. They really play for each other. It's the best team chemistry since I've come along."

As opportunities arise, Thomas has seen players step up and accept the challenge. Senior co-captain Grace Mc Guire has taken the reins as the team's leader. According to Thoms, "She is vocal in the locker room and always has good comments and feedback from the team. She is a high character kid and has excelled as a leader. On the court, she is a good shooter and a tough

rebounder. She does a lot of things on the court that the average fan doesn't notice."

Sophomore Kate Brown has been called upon to play various positions from point guard to forward as needed and has been holding up well.

Mariella Crudella is another player that has stepped up when Ashley Thoms went down. Averaging 4.5 points on the season, she scored a season high 17 points in the next game. Freshman center, Kianna Thorsman has gotten the opportunity to start and has gained great experience that has helped her and the team immediately and in the long run. Says Thoms: "It's been a great opportunity and highlight for me to see her step up to the challenge."

Senior co-captain Haley Van Dyke, who will be playing at the University of Washington next season, has bounced back well from a sprained ankle that forced her to miss five games earlier in the season.

Thoms cannot say enough about his respect for Van Dyke's overall skills: "Haley has continued to develop in a lot of different areas. She is a real leader and a tough matchup for anybody. She is a top scorer (averaging 28.5 points per game) having improved her quickness and moves. I've watched her toughness develop constantly from her freshman year. She has tools that other players just don't have. What really sets her apart is her great anticipation as to where the ball is going when shots are missed (averaging 17.5 rebounds per game). She is such a good ball handler, she could play guard if called upon. On top of this, she does a good job in our press."

Thoms does not back down from the challenges that have confronted his team: "I cherish the adversity that my team goes through in a season. It builds character in kids. This is an important thing for the kids to go through."

In her first year as the Acalanes head coach, Michelle Sasaki came upon a very young team with only two seniors, one junior, five sophomores and two freshmen. Yet approaching the league season, the Dons have an 11-4 record.

Sasaki is very positive about the team's prospects in the short and long term: "I'm glad that we had success here. The team works extremely hard. They want to improve and get better. It's a fun group to coach. The youth on the team is very promising in the long run. We're building a foundation."

As well as things have been going, the Dons took a big hit when sophomore Kaylee Pond went down with a

torn ACL in her knee much to the chagrin of Sasaki: "Kaylee was a driving force on the team. She played guard, wing, forward and point forward."

Senior Olivia Toth has also been out with injuries yet has remained committed to the team, attending all the practices and team functions.

Captain Sydney Louie has become the leader for this young team. According to Sasaki: "Sydney has a great engine. She is gritty and a fierce competitor. She provides a lot of texture to our team and is the verbal leader on the floor. As a player, she is a good penetrator on offense and has taken more responsibility for distributing the ball."

The younger players have stepped up for Acalanes. At the West Coast Jamboree Tournament in Las Vegas, freshman Grace Gebhardt and sophomores Lauren Kobashigawa were both named to the all-tournament team.

Sophomore Lauren Frechman is another force on the team. Says Sasaki: "Lauren is a great 3-point shooter and an aggressive player on defense."

Defense is an area that Sasaki takes pride in: "We need to be more consistent defensively and we will concentrate on that because basketball is a very offensive game. It's about us holding our opponents in the 30s mid-40s." The Don defense has been holding their opponents to average of 43 points per game.

Summing up the season, Sasaki puts it this way: "We're progressing in the right direction. We have faced a lot of adversity due to injuries and illnesses. At times we have had to play with only six or seven players. We try to control what we can control and not worry about the numbers. I'm proud of the way the girls have battled every game."

In his ninth year as the Miramonte head basketball coach, Kelly Sopak removes any doubt how his team is going to play their next opponent: "I went to this system eight years ago. I will play 13-15 kids and press our opponents all the time. We don't do a lot of conditioning, but we do a lot of drills in pressing and transition." The Matadors have been able to continue to be successful with Sopak's system beginning league play with a 12-4 record.

Coming off a 30-4 record last season, having lost in the fourth round of the state tournament to Vanden (Fairfield) by a 66-65 score might have had some carryover to the next season, but Sopak would not allow it: "We seldom talk about winning and losing. It's the process that's important. The lesson we hope the girls take away from our program is that you can never assume the next season. We want the girls to seize the opportunities that are presented, to live in the moment and stay in the moment."

With so many girls playing, Sopak has come to rely on his captains, senior point guard Clair Steele (who will be playing for Lehigh next year), senior wing Colette Kirkpatrick and junior guard/wing Emily Huston. Says Sopak: "The captains are an extension of me. They embody how the team plays, how they represent themselves off the court and how the team performs academically."

Miramonte has had a very difficult schedule prior to the beginning of league play which is how Sopak planned it: "The thing that I have learned is that even though we're young, we've maintained our composure and to be able to weather that type of schedule has been very pleasantly received by me."

Still with so many girls playing on the team, there are some standouts on the court. Sopak has been coaching Steele since the first grade and can't speak highly enough about her: "Claire is a tenacious player and a hard worker. She has consistently improved from year to year. She has a great basketball IQ and understands the game more than anyone else on the floor. Besides the intangibles, she is a great ball handler and a top shooter. When she is on, she is a tough cover."

Sophomore Erin Tarasow, always a good shooter, has become more aggressive to the basket this year.

Freshman Mia Mastrov has also impressed Sopak a great deal: "Mia has a presence about her and is a great shooter. She utilizes her length well defensively and is willing to go hard to the basket."

Senior Jordyn Bryant is being counted on to provide an additional spark to the game, having just returned from London. According to Sopak: "Jordyn had been a two year starter at the post position and her return will really help us. She is very physical and her ability to run the floor will be huge for us."

With all of the talent on the team, Sopak takes the most pride in the girls' teamwork, bragging how they recently defeated La Jolla Country Day School, having played all 15 girls with 12 of them scoring and only one player in double figures. Sopak requires the girls to buy into his system and explains it this way: "I tell them to look to your right and then your left. If you are going to demand credit, you're on the wrong team."

With such a young team (eight freshman and sophomores in the rotation), Sopak feels the key is for his team to "be more physical. We look so young, we're not going to intimidate anyone physically so we needed to bring it to every game."

Still, Sopak can always fall back on his full court press: "We work on our press every day and it is very intense. It is hard for teams to replicate it and for them to handle it. We have been able to adjust ourselves

to how a team will attack our press and we've seen just about every strategy to handle it. You may beat us but you're not going to beat us the way you would beat another team."

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