

## Lamorinda girls basketball teams continue to raise the bar



Lauren Kobashigawa

Photo Gint Federas

### By Jon Kingdon

The Lamorinda girls basketball teams have all gotten off to excellent starts to their seasons. With a combined record of 13-2, Miramonte (4-0), Acalanes (5-1), and Campolindo (4-1) have already established themselves as teams not to be overlooked.

After going independent last season, Miramonte finished the season with a 28-4 record, making it to the second round of the state tournament. With a schedule that will send them to Wyoming, Nevada and Oregon, head coach Kelly Sopak has a mature, experienced and confident team to take on all comers.

"We've got a lot of seniors and juniors now and you can see the whole evolution of their progress. They're just out there enjoying it a little bit more and not worrying about the small stuff," said Sopak. "Our four years of tough scheduling is

paying dividends, so the girls don't get too high and don't get too low. On the court, they know they have a job to do and regardless of the score, they have time to do it."

Some things never change. Miramonte will press all over the court on defense, continue to push the ball up the court and use his entire roster. "We use all our players. If they're on the varsity, they have to be able to play," says Sopak. "With so many games, you need players to finish it off and give the starters a rest and those are important minutes for those kids to play. They all have the green light to shoot. We want them to stay aggressive."

There is more size on this team, says Sopak: "Our post play has really improved. P.K. Hall was a substitute last year. Nikki Lynch is a rugby player who came up from the JV and is going to get big minutes along with Chloe Breznikar, who also

came up from the JV."

The point guard position is being handled by senior Rebecca Welsh, whose 3-point shooting skills may break Sabrina Ionescu's career record this year. She is being backed up by senior Mykaangela Mambandos. Says Sopak: "She had limited playing time last year but this season she has come along really nicely."

Leading the offense are seniors Erin Tarasow and Leah Sopak, along with juniors Junior Mia Mastrov who is already receiving some Pac 12 offers and Jordan Allred who has committed to the University of Idaho.

Sopak is taking a long-term perspective on the season: "It's going to be interesting to see how we develop because we have a very tough schedule with the games and all of the tournaments that we are playing in. In the end, our record will probably show a lack of improvement. My hope is that those games will propel us to getting used to those games leading to the post season."

#### Acalanes

After a 17-8 record last season and only losing one player to graduation, the Dons have a mature, veteran team that head coach Michelle Sasaki is very familiar with: "I think that there is a comfort zone with our continuity. We don't have to start from scratch and go over things as much so we're able to get to more things and layer it on top of what we already built upon. That is definitely an added plus."

Despite only having a roster of nine players, this is still a luxury for Sasaki since she had games last season where there were only six or seven girls available to play. "The players are all familiar with my offense and defense which means that I can move the bar up so they don't get too complacent and just dial it in. We want to climb up another rung and keep ascending the ladder. This is a team with some very good talent and depth."

Freshmen Emily Du and Isabella Aris-Dumas are getting playing time and cutting their teeth on varsity players. Says

Sasaki: "They came to all of the open gyms we had in the fall and that proved to be very fruitful for them as they showed a genuine commitment to the team and the game, improving a lot which made it a viable opportunity for them to be on the varsity."

The team is led by senior and league MVP Kaylee Pond, who Sasaki calls "our Swiss army knife because she does everything. She can play the 1 through 5 and will do so at various times."

Junior first team all-league player Lauren Kobashigawa and second team all-league Lauren Frechman are the team's two starting guards.

Grace Gebhardt, also first team all-league is the leading force in the front court, says Sasaki: "Grace has phenomenal hand-eye coordination and she is a competitor. She understands the game and she wants to win. I like her fiery competitiveness and you will see her on the inside and the outside."

With only nine players on the roster, everyone should find playing time and the goal is to avoid any injuries.

There is a real advantage in the Dons' schedule in that, outside of tournaments, the team has 14 home games and only five road games. "For the last two years, we've been road warriors and now it's payback time," says Sasaki. "This year we have those teams coming our way. It's been a long time coming."

#### Campolindo

Last year, it was a learning experience for first year head coach Matt Kirby and his Campolindo players. In his second season, it's a lot more comfortable situation for Kirby: "The returners from last year are a little more experienced. Last year, we were a lot of new faces getting used to varsity basketball and this year it feels like we belong on the court. I see a lot of improvement from our returners and the new girls on the team. We're where we want to be, but we can get a lot better. I have a better idea of what we have and what we need to do."

The Cougars have started

off this season winning four of their first five games. Last season, they did not win their fourth game until the 12th game of the season.

With only four seniors, this is still a very young team, which includes one sophomore and three freshmen. Kirby is counting on two of those freshmen, Camille Yabu and Allie Korth: "They are nonstop players. They have played a great deal of basketball on their club teams and have the ability to step right in as wing type players. Our third freshman, Ava Garcia, is a multiple sports player and is a very good athlete and a fighter who should contribute as well."

Still it's the upperclassmen that Kirby is relying on: "Our team will go as far as our upperclassmen will take us. Everybody really gets along with each other, which is not always the case with freshmen. Still, our freshmen played a lot with us in the summertime and are very good players."

Leading the team are co-captains Kate Brown and Olivia De Paschalis. "Olivia leads by example. She is always there giving great effort and has battled through some injuries. Kate brings the most experience to the team as our point guard. She has become a good leader and the kids respect her."

The front court is headed by junior Kiana Thorson, who was honorable mention all-league, along with senior Emily Marsten, junior Meg Larsen and freshman Allie Korth.

For Kirby, depth is the key to the team's success: "I know what I will get from our top players. The 4-5-6 rotation is the group that we are going to need to get contributions from as the season develops."

The one tournament that Kirby was personally looking forward to is the Paris Twins Classic Tournament at Piedmont High School on Dec. 12-14 where Kirby played for three years under Miramonte Boys head coach Chris Lavdiotis: "It's always nice for me to go back as I have had a lot of history with the city and it will be good to play on a court that I had played on so often."

## The Saint Mary's men's soccer team finishes another great season



Photo provided

### Submitted by Melanie Moyer

The Saint Mary's men's soccer team finished another impressive season this year with their second West Coast Conference win and a 7-0 winning streak. This marks another historic season for the team, for they haven't won every game within their conference in fifteen years. Their success comes in the wake of last year's accomplishments when they carried a 6-0-1 winning streak to win the West Coast Conference for the first time since 2011, resulting in a cumulative record for the last two seasons of 34-2-2. The soccer team's past two seasons have held noteworthy accomplishments for both the team and the school, for winning back to back West Coast Conference titles hasn't happened in the past 12 years. This success within the conference also sent them to the NCAA tournament for the second year in a row. The team came into competition with players from 24 other conferences from around the country, putting our small school on the map of the soccer world.

Hosting an NCAA tournament game is an impressive accomplishment for any Division I sports team to make. The Saint Mary's soccer team

has hosted tournament games two seasons in a row, becoming the first Saint Mary's sports team to bring the NCAA tournament home with them. This is due to their placement within the tournament's standings, for the soccer team was seeded within the top 15 of the tournament. In 2018, Saint Mary's was seeded No. 8 and in 2019 No. 12. In comparison to past qualifying seasons where the team was ranked in the range of 80-100, this is a major accomplishment.

This sudden improvement of the team can be attributed to many different factors. The improved coaching staff has made a big difference in the abilities of the team. Head coach Adam Cooper has coached the team for 14 seasons, with all titles won under his guidance. This season, the West Coast Conference named Cooper Coach of the Year. Further, the team's roster has proved to be very fruitful, with players hailing from around the world. About 11 of the players have international backgrounds, most coming from Germany, New Zealand, Italy, and other European countries. However, it is the team's defensive effort that has yielded the accomplishments they have today. The numbers speak for themselves, for the team was only scored on twice within their conference this season and only

scored on once in 2018. Further, in 2018, their defense conceded the least goals in America. Other accomplishments include the naming of their scoring offense as fourth in the country and their goal assists as 11th. For reference, these rankings are out of 204 teams in the country. Also, in the All-WCC awards, several players were recognized for their playing abilities. Anders Engebretsen was named West Coast Conference Co-Player of the Year for his offensive achievements, having scored 16 goals this season. Filippo Zattarin was named Defensive Player of the Year and Remi Prieur was named Goalkeeper of the Year.

This sudden shift in the team's accomplishments has impacted fans and players alike. Valentin Sponer, a junior on the soccer team, reflected on his team's change since he was a freshman with amazement. When Sponer was a freshman, their statistics were 6-6-5, a number that dwindles in comparison to his sophomore and junior years. During his freshman year, he recounted that the team was unbeaten at home, but their success on the road was a different story. Their hard work on the field did not seem to be transferring to their performance when they left their home grounds. Having witnessed the shift in the team's abilities firsthand, Sponer noted that the team's cultural change was the most significant improvement. They grew a mindset where their games both home and away took precedence over everything else, making them take both their practice and their performance more seriously. This included a greater emphasis on spring training during the off-season, as well as high expectations for all the players. The shift resulted in a more aggressive team on the field, for Sponer describes that the players took pride in and wanted to maintain their ability to keep their opponents from scoring on them. The away games were taken more seriously by all of the players, putting them on a more direct road to victory.

The cultural change to Sponer also existed in the team's dynamics. Their arrival to campus three to four weeks before the rest of the student

body had a huge impact on the player's relationships with each other. They bonded over this period of practice called "Captain's Practice," where coaches are not allowed to take part in the team's practicing by NCAA rules. During this time, the freshmen and players that live on campus lived with the other members of the team, sometimes resulting in two-bedroom apartments being shared amongst five or six soccer players. After these student-athletes were allowed to move on campus, most chose to reside with teammates in the college dorms. Besides their living situations, players also bonded over the dinners the team hosted every other night. During these dinners, freshmen volunteered to sing for their teammates or took part in other fun activities. Last season, older players convinced the freshmen that "Corn Hole" was a game in which they had to eat corn on the cob faster than their fellow teammates. To Sponer, this bonding off the field made a significant difference in the overall playing of the team.

Sponer also described Saint Mary's atmosphere as having a significant impact on the team. Other top 10 schools have huge student populations and big soccer programs. However, since Saint Mary's holds such a small student population, Sponer finds it to be a more humbling program. He finds that he is not treated differently than others by faculty and fellow students alike. After achieving such great accomplishments as a team, they're often greeted with little recognition or acknowledgment by other students, so players can feel like regular students during their studies and team practices. This, Sponer says, pushes them all harder to perform as a team. However, in the future, Sponer hopes to raise awareness for the team's success, especially because of their increase in accomplishments. After winning the West Coast Conference and qualifying for the NCAA tournament two years in a row, the Saint Mary's Men's Soccer team is expecting both a higher interest in their team from fans and students, as well as another successful season next year.