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Lamorinda basketball leads the way in competitive Diablo Athletic League

By Jon Kingdon



Jake Davis (32), Tate Nelson (5), Jack Bayless (24) Photo Ken Bayless

The last three seasons for Campolindo coach Steven Dyer would certainly be hard pressed to match after winning the state championship, the NorCal championship (with the state final canceled due to the coronavirus) and a 15-0 record in last springs abbreviated season. So far, the Cougars have not missed a beat, going undefeated in their first five games.

Having lost talented players like Emmanuel Callas, Chase Bennett, and Max Weaver there is still a solid core of players that returned from last year's team. "Even with a number of returners on the team, it's important to remember that every group is a new group," Dyer said.

Campolindo has never backed down from playing a top schedule and that also goes back to Dyer: "I strongly believe that a strong schedule will really prepare you for the playoffs. Being No. 1 in preseason doesn't matter. It's where you are at the end."

Dyer was true to his words by opening against a highly ranked Dublin team on the road, in front of a full house and coming out on top 50-42 and winning the Gridley tournament defeating Gridley, De La Salle and Archbishop Riordan in the championship game, and now have a school record of 24 straight wins over a period of 475 days.

The Cougars have a well-balanced offense with several options. It seems that every year, another shooter shows up for Campolindo. This year's new arrival is Clay Naffziger (6.2) who scored 17 points and had eight rebounds in the Gridley Championship game. With seniors Aidan Mahaney (15.4), and Cade Bennett (8.4) along with juniors Logan Robeson (4.0 - out until January with a hand injury) and Shane O'Reilly (8.6). Stating the obvious, Dyer puts it simply: "We have a lot of guys that can shoot the ball."

Senior center 6'6" Matt Radell (5.0/6.0 reb) has shown a constant growth since his freshman year. "We're looking for Matt to be a real force as a rebounder," Dyer said. "He's also the best screen setter on the team and has really improved in both areas." Justin Yasukochi (5.0) is the team's leading rebounder averaging 6.5 rebounds per game.

At the other end of the scale, 5'6" sophomore, Tyler Bergren (3.6), a point guard, should see a fair amount of time on the floor.

When Mahaney declared early his intention to attend Saint Mary's, it removed what could have been a distraction for him, Dyer and the team with so many colleges bidding for his talent. "It was a relief for Aidan and all of us to get it out of the way early," Dyer said. "We're just hopeful for a normal team."

Dyer is someone who never overlooks his defense. "We can be a fast team, but it will be contingent on us making defensive stops and then running the other way," Dyer said. "Defense is something that we always have to work on at this point and filling different spots for the players. They don't always have to be scoring roles. It's guys doing the little things which are going to be important for this team to win."

As has been the case for the last three years, the Cougars are the team everyone will be gunning for. "Every team is going to want to beat us because of how well we've done," Dyer said. "We can't take anything for granted. It's important that the players know that last year's success does not mean anything."

Miramonte

In his third year at Miramonte, head coach Chris Lavdiotis has a team that he has great confidence in and shows it in his offensive philosophy. "We call it freedom with structure, giving them concepts and just letting them play," Lavdiotis said. "I don't want to be the type of coach that is constantly calling the plays because that would slow us down and we're pretty good running the ball up the court."

At 6-1, the system seems to be working.

Guard Tyler Dutto (8.5) is the leader on the court and leads the team in assists with 5.8 per game. "Tyler is the starter but the nice thing about our team is that just above everyone on the team can play guard,"

Lavdiotis said. "Because of that, we've developed the skill set to be able to play five out basketball and have different players initiate. Even at 6'5", Caden Breznikar (15.7) is a great initiator but in the end, it will be by the group." Breznikar is also leading the team in assists with 5.0 per game.

Coming into the season, Lavdiotis was looking for someone to step up and be a force on the court the way Niyi Olabode (playing now at UC Riverside) was last season. Senior James Frye has taken on that role, so far leading the team with an average of 19.6 points per game. Ben Murphy (12.7) has developed into a valuable weapon with his outside shooting.

"We're a read and react type of offense with all of the players facing the basket or the fifth guy in the key starting things," Lavdiotis said.

Even with the team's early success, there will be more talent to call soon. Miramonte will be getting help as the year develops from transfers and players rehabbing from injuries. Guards Marcus Robinson and Koleton Fenton are waiting to become eligible to play due to transfer rules. "When Marcus gets cleared, we will go from really good to very, very good," Lavdiotis said. "He has been working and training really hard and he's become a very vocal player, particularly on the defensive side. Koleton is also going to help us a lot."

Three players have come over from the football team: Dutto and Sam Ross, who are playing through injuries, and Luke Duncan who will be out at least four weeks with a shoulder injury.

Lavdiotis sees grittiness with the team. "It starts on the defensive end," Lavdiotis said. "We want to dictate what our opponents are going to do on offense. We want them to really communicate and at times get a little crazy and ferocious on defense."

Ultimately, Lavdiotis wants the players to take the ultimate responsibility for the play on the court: "We're trying to create a real positive situation and it's pretty organic. We've always told the players that they have to do this naturally. When it comes from the players, it's a better situation. It also helps that this team is very coachable, competitive, connected, works well together and they listen."

Acalanes (3-2)

Acalanes' first year head coach Bill Powers' initial goal has been to establish an attitude right from the start. "Defensively is where I hope that our identity is created because that's what we can control on a nightly basis," Powers said. You can't control your shooting percentage as much as you can control your attitude and effort on defense."

On offense for Powers, it's a matter of getting the players to take things a step at a time and keeping things simple. "Basketball is not 32 minutes but a combination of every possession and at this point, we're just trying to win every possession," Powers said. "The game is about passing and shooting and being a good teammate on offense and defense. We're teaching Acalanes shots, not me shots, making sure that the right guys are shooting the ball at the right time. It's what goes into winning a possession and if they continue to be receptive, I like where this team could be in February."

Powers will be counting on point guard Theo Stoll, center Jake Davis, Noah Bloch and Jack Bayliss, all juniors. "Theo and Jake are both really good players," Powers said. "Noah is someone that is always early in the gym. He's going to be a key player for us, and Jack is a consistent player from tip to buzzer. There are a lot of players that bring heart and soul to the court, but Jack creates a heartbeat for us."

At this point though, the team is still in the process of determining who are going to be the team's consistent outside shooters.

There are also players that are bringing a physical presence from the football team, Tyler Murphy, Justin Zegarowski and Nathan Bennett, a trio that Powers readily welcomes: "They will definitely help. I've had a lot of success with multiple sport athletes and these football players bring another dimension to our team."

Powers is aware of the quality of talent that makes up the Diablo Athletic League acknowledging that "it's a heck of a league and I am honored to be coaching in the DAL."

As the players have learned Powers' philosophy and schemes, he has learned from them as well: "They want to be coached and they want to be good, and I feel fortunate to be in this position to coach them. I'm trying to create a winning team that pays attention to all the little details and keeps getting better each day. We're not competing against yesterday and that is not just a cliché. I really love this team."

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