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Acalanes girls win NCS Championship

By Jon Kingdon



Acalanes High School girls basketball NCS Champions Photo Jon Kingdon

Acalanes, a team with no seniors, starting four freshmen for most of the season and finishing last season ranked 294th in the state, came into this championship game ranked 44th and ran away with a dominating 57-37 victory over Northgate.

Having defeated Northgate two times earlier in the season by 20 and 23 points, the main concern for Acalanes' head coach Margaret Gartner, prior to their third meeting this season, was the possibility of her team being overconfident. "We talked about how it's tough to beat a team three times in a season so how we started out in this game was key," Gartner said.

After scoring the first two points six seconds into the game, it was simply a matter of not looking back. The Lady Dons were clearly in control leading by 17-3 at the end of the first quarter and 28-10 at the half.

"I'm not sure we can play a better half," Gartner said. "That was spectacular and some of our shooting was awesome. The last time that we had played

Northgate, we had seven turnovers in the first quarter, and I told our team we couldn't do that again."

In their previous two games versus Northgate, Sophie Gartner, Dulci Vail and Karyss Lacanlale had all missed some time, but the team was very healthy though junior guard Sophia Alvarado suffered a shoulder injury in pregame and was forced to watch the game with her arm in a sling. "This was the first time we had everyone together, so I didn't want the team to be overconfident," Gartner said.

That was advice that Northgate could have used. The Dons forced Northgate into committing 29 turnovers, 19 in the first half, which speaks to Gartner's philosophy on the importance of her team's defense. "Right from day one, it was always about defense for us," Gartner said. "You can't count on your shot going in, but you can count on effort, defense and rebounding. So, in every practice, we work on 1-on-1, 1-on-2, 2-on-2, getting up and down the court."

Freshman Sophie Chinn was in the zone on offense, leading Acalanes with 31 points, including seven 3-point field goals, highlighted by a 35-footer at the end of the third quarter. Chinn was all over the floor on offense, either bringing the ball up the court, shooting from the wing and playing the post inside. She also had several steals on defense and led the team with 13 rebounds. "Sophie loves to guard our opponents' best player," Gartner said.

Chinn's ability to fill several positions has been a key to the team's success. "During COVID, Sophie would play point guard though I was a little worried about not getting as many rebounds," Gartner said.

Despite having a roster with no seniors, the team came together quickly. "From the start of the season we worked really well together and bonded as a team," Chinn said. "That was reflected on the court, and we have always been ready to come out and play."

Junior Emily Du assumed a mantle of influence with the underclassmen this season. "As the oldest player on the team, I've taken leadership role," Du said. "It's been really fun making a connection with my teammates who are not in my grade and my coaches. I've really learned from the best about leadership."

When a team will press and fast break all game, like Acalanes does, the players had better be in top shape. "We were running the track everyday and lifting weights," Du said. Everybody was dedicated to the team, and it became their first priority. "It was then that I knew we were going to be really good. It was made clear to us that our conditioning would make the difference between winning and losing games."

The team's conditioning was once again an important aspect in the victory. "We knew that we could wear Northgate down if we could make them work 90 feet," Gartner said. "We just wanted to outwork them and hoped that the ball would go in on offense."

The loud and boisterous crowd was appreciated by the players and coaches alike. "We all worked together tonight as a team," Chinn said. "We had so many fans with us, and it really helped us on offense and defense. The crowd was great. Everyone was into the game and their reaction after every shot we made was awesome."

The Acalanes fans did have a negative effect on the game for the Dons in the fourth quarter. Someone in the crowd threw a ball at a Northgate player which resulted in a technical foul called against Acalanes. With 5:30 to go in the fourth quarter, the officials called the players together at midcourt to calm things down. "They told us to have a clean game and to continue playing," Chinn said. "We should ignore the fans and keep working hard on the court."

When Gartner was asked if they were going to take time to celebrate the NCS championship, her answer spoke volumes as to the commitment she and the team had to the upcoming state tournament: "Actually, we're going to practice tomorrow. Back to the gym!"

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