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High hopes for Lamorinda basketball

By Jon Kingdon



Ariana Hallstrom Photos Cimon Yiannikos

Acalanes girls basketball (11-3) is a team without a senior on the roster, but they can claim to be as experienced as any opponent they will face this year. With a starting lineup of five juniors, (K.K. Lacanlale, Sophie Chinn, Dulci Vail, Ariana Hallstrom, and Natalie Frechman), all who have been on the team since their freshman year, it's essentially a team where everything's the same, only more so.

"They're playing better together, they don't get rattled and they're a lot more mature on the court," head coach Margaret Gartner said. "They've seen it all and they know when the screens are coming. It's nice to have veterans on the court because they can make some reads themselves and I don't have to do it all."

There are only three new additions to the team, juniors Addi Ames and Emma Seelenbacher, who have added size in the front court, and transfer guard Sofia Fernandez who soon will be eligible to play. "Sofia will definitely help," Gartner said. "She is fast and can shoot

it and will be another guard in the rotation without any drop off. She will make a big difference because in one game we ran out of gas in the fourth quarter. Addie can rebound and defend, and her offense is improving, and Emma is coming along."

Lacanlale (DAL co-MVP) and Chinn (1st team all-league) are co-captains and Gartner puts it simply: "They're playing great."

Hallstrom, who missed much of last season with a knee injury and still was honorable mention all-league, has made a complete recovery. "Ariana is turning people's heads this year," Gartner said. "She can defend shoot and just finds a way to score. Natalie is stronger, playing better defense and is a 3-point shooter."

Dulci Vail is the sole front court starter and is equally effective from the outside along with four guards. "We're like five out, not really putting anyone inside," Gartner said.

Gartner compensates for the team's lack of size with a strategy relying on the team's athleticism. "We use our ability to beat people up and down the court. We're passing better and you'll see the ball flying everywhere," Gartner said. "We know that we're going to see some big players but if we can make it a transition game, we can take their big players out of the game. We will man cover primarily but we will zone as well. We are throwing different looks at our opponents to keep them guessing."

The key for the team's success for Gartner is simple: "Stay healthy. We do a lot of weight work with our strength coach, Joe Escobar, to help avoid injuries and make our girls stronger than they were last year."

Campolindo

In the last two seasons for the Campolindo girls, they amassed a combined record of 15-35 and 2-22 in league play and lost their leading two scorers. New head coach Doug Cardoni didn't want to start with any preconceived notions about the team. "I did not watch the team play because I did not want to have an opinion before I showed up," Cardoni said. "Quite frankly, I was pleasantly surprised because I got a better team than I thought I was going to get."

Cardoni does not use set plays for his team. "I believe in skill development more than anything else, so we don't have any plays in practice," Cardoni said. "My perfect game would be where I don't say anything for the entire game, and we just play basketball." At this point it appears to be working as Campolindo has a 9-6 record, despite two returners out with injuries: Becca Tanner (wrist) and Avery Yasukochi (knee), who has recently returned to action.

Cardoni gives the players a lot of liberty on the court. "I had to really convince them that if they try something aggressive and it doesn't work, I will still cheer for them and not pull them out of the game," Cardoni said. "We do all kinds of spacing drills, and we will pick and roll over and over again until we get a matchup that we love and then try to exploit that mismatch."

Cardoni has had to find a way to compensate for the team's lack of size. "I like to play defense the same way I like to play offense - very aggressively, taking risks going for steals, in your face man-to-man

defense," Cardoni said. "At the end of the day, basketball is more of a mindset which has to be, 'I'm not only going to stop you and I'm going to stop the person next to you' and if the whole team has that mentality, we're going to be a good defensive team. (Campolindo's boy's coach) Steven Dyer has been so helpful to me coming here and been just absolutely great."

Co-captain Julia Erickson-King has epitomized the attitude he is looking for on defense. "Julia is our center at a whopping 5'5"," Cardoni said. "She is super strong, does jujitsu so she knows leverage and is not scared of anything."

Junior guards Ali McCauley and Raegan Shum, also co-captains, have set the example for the rest of the team. "They're both playing great on both ends of the court and because they play so hard, and they're so unselfish, it's easy for everyone to follow them," Cardoni said.

The Cougars are well represented from seniors to freshmen and Cardoni is willing to use whoever deserves to play. Senior Sophie Lederle and freshman Jenna Chan have been pleasant surprises for Cardoni. "Sophie hadn't played basketball since eighth grade," Cardoni said. "She showed up at one of our open gyms and has earned a spot in the rotation. She is a great athlete with a motor like you haven't seen. Jenna has started every game and she's earned it making clutch shots and has made a number of steals on defense."

Still, there are things more important than winning for Cardoni: "My goals are for the players to get better at basketball, have fun and be free to learn life lessons along the way. We're a young team but the energy and enthusiasm they're bringing every day to me is remarkable."

Miramonte

With the graduation of the Scheingarts, Katherine and Courtney, Miramonte head coach Vince Wirthman was anxiously waiting the return to the team of co-captain Willa Mapaye, who was coming off a knee injury suffered last season. Mapaye has just finished her rehabilitation and has only recently returned to play this season. She scored 23 points in her first two games back.

Miramonte is still a team looking for its identity. "We've had moments where we look great and others when we've played poorly," Wirthman said. "We just need to string a few good quarters together and we'll be fine."

Maegan Eichenberger, Julia Quinn Ferguson, and Marianna Lawrence are seeing the majority of the time in the backcourt and have all improved their scoring from last season. "Julia has been our leader in assists, steals and has a lot of rebounds and Maegan is very tough and aggressive on offense and defense," Wirthman said. "Marianna has gotten better every year and is super tough."

Robin Parmelee, a transfer this year, has also been a force in the backcourt. "Robin's a solid player and we're lucky to get her," Wirthman said. "She's a good shooter that plays defense and is just a good all-round player."

Karena Eberts, a co-MVP in the DAL last season, remains a force in the frontcourt leading the team in scoring (16.6) and rebounding (11.0). "We're basically four guards and Karena in the frontcourt. She is really talented on both ends of the court, a great leader, and a straight A student and is really the heart of the team," Wirthman said.

Wirthman sees the team's offense as the key to the team's improvement. "We're not shooting the ball that well right now but I think we will," Wirthman said. "We need to get a little tougher on defense but we're getting there for sure. We just have to clean up a few mistakes here and there and we'll just keep getting better."



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[back](#)

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