

Women's Basketball

Storm rolls past Cougars

JOHN THORBURN
Sports Editor

The Chemeketa women's basketball team did what no other team in the Northwest could do this season—defeat Clackamas three times.

In doing so, the Storm [25-4] from Salem eliminated the Cougars' hopes of a Northwest Athletic Association [NWAACC] tournament berth with a 77-61 win and ended their season.

Last Thursday, the two teams faced off at Chemeketa in a playoff match that sent the winner to the championship tournament and sent the loser packing.

Clackamas [19-11], who hadn't played well in two league games earlier in the year, dug itself a hole early.

Sophomore post Nichole Hayden received two fouls just three minutes into the game before being assessed a technical foul after a verbal altercation with Chemeketa's Lindsay Estep. With the first half less than five minutes old, Hayden was forced to sit out the rest of the opening period.

Down by 18 at the break, the Cougars clawed their way back into the contest but could never lower the deficit to less than seven points.

"It was a disappointing way to end a pretty good year," said Clackamas Head Coach Jim Martineau. "We've played pretty well the last few weeks of the regular season and so I thought we had some confidence

and momentum going into this game.

"We just didn't come out of the gate very strongly. We got into foul trouble in the first half which hurt us and we didn't play well in that half. Down by 18 at halftime, we made a great effort to cut it down to five points, but unfortunately we couldn't get over the hump.

"Like always, they played hard and I got everything that I could out of them. We just didn't play good enough in the first half but I am very proud of them in the way they bounced back in the second half."

Melinda Freeman led Clackamas with 13 points while Hayden added 11 points. Sina Gago and Michelle Thueson scored 10 points each while Noelle Johnson grabbed eight rebounds.

Hayden, Gago and Johnson, three of the team's six sophomores, fouled out in their final games for Clackamas.

The 61 point effort by the Cougars' offense was the fewest number of points scored all season by the squad. The team's scoring average for the year was 72.1 points per game.

"We were a great home team and just an average road team this year," said Martineau. "I'm not exactly sure why, but there was something about getting ready and going to play on the road. That was probably our downfall for not getting to where we needed to go. If we had won a few more games on the road, we probably would have been in a position to contend for a league title."



JOHN THORBURN / Clackamas Print

Michelle Thueson defends against Chemeketa's Lindsay Estep in the Cougars' 77-61 loss to the Storm last Thursday in Salem. The loss eliminated Clackamas from the Southern Region playoffs and ended its season with a 19-11 record.

The Cougars were 14-2 at home while going 5-9 on the road since November.

After Clackamas' 30 games, Freeman led the team with a 14.7 scoring average, Hayden finished with 13.9 ppg, Sina Gago scored an average of 11.2 ppg and Rachel Hudson added 9.79 ppg. All four of the squad's scoring leaders are sophomores.

"We've got some big shoes to fill," noted Martineau. "We've got six players that are leaving, four of them are starters. All six sophomores contributed so much to the program over the past two seasons, it will be difficult to see them go."

"At different times over the course of the season, different players needed to step up and they did. Rachel and Katie [Krupicka] improved a ton since last year, Sina got better from her freshman year, and Noelle, Nichole and Melinda did as good as they did their freshman year, if not better. They came in and worked hard to get themselves in shape. They were really easy to coach."

Martineau, who spent four years as an assistant coach for Clackamas, just completed his first season as the Cougars' head coach.

"As an assistant coach, you tend to have a role with the players that is more of a friendship," said Martineau. "As the head coach, I've tried to keep that role with these players."

"Any time a group of players see their assistant coach become their head coach, there is usually a few problems. There were a few times when it was trying for both the players and the coaches, but we worked through it and ended up being successful."

Hayden, perhaps the team's top prospect to continue playing at a four year school, is one of six Clackamas players that have the opportunity to play for NAIA and Division II schools.

Five of the Cougars' sophomores are still contemplating the idea of con-

tinuing their basketball careers, and Assistant Coach Denise Bean, a Clackamas player from 1996-98, has plans to resume her career as a player.

"They all have talent to continue playing somewhere," noted Martineau. "It just depends on them and how much they want to keep playing. There's a lot of NAIA interest for all of them in the area."

Next season, four freshmen will return to the lineup, led by starting point guard Michelle Thueson and guard Trina Rogers, who led the NWAACC in three-point percentage [47%].

Krystal Nakamoto, a member of the Cougars' 1997 squad which finished second in the NWAACC, is also considering returning for her sophomore year.

"We'll have to recruit some post players," noted Martineau. "Four of our six graduating players are posts, so we've got some holes to fill. We also need to get some players that will push our freshmen. I think one of the problems that we had this year

was that we had nobody to push our sophomores.

"Stepping in as the head coach, I was more concerned with just filling spots rather than building strong depth. This spring, I'm going to recruit the best talent that I can find so the returning players need to know that their positions are going to be challenged."

On Saturday, Chemeketa upset top-ranked Umpqua in Roseburg to enter the NWAACC tournament as the Southern Region's #1 seed.

The Umpqua loss was its first loss on its home court in over three years.

• Nichole Hayden and Melinda Freeman were named to the Southern Region First Team. Sina Gago was given honorable mention. All three players will compete in the NWAACC All-Star Games on March 14 in Longview, Wash.

• Former Clackamas player Robbie Nix, now playing for the Portland State University Vikings was a unanimous selection for the Big Sky Conference's outstanding sixth player award.



JOHN THORBURN / Clackamas Print

Nichole Hayden elevates over Chemeketa's Lindsay Estep and Terri Shaw for two of her 11 points in a 77-61 loss to the Storm. Hayden is one of three Clackamas players that will compete in the NWAACC All-Star games on March 14 in Longview, Wash.

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