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ABOVE: The Lady Celts celebrate after a win over Newberg High School sending them to the state tournament, which began Wednesday. A: Senior Kaelie Flores puts up a shot. B: Sydney Hunter makes a drive to the hoop. C: Reina Strand on defense. D: Madi Hingston moves the ball up the court.



Keizer girls enter tourney on 7-win streak

By ERIC A. HOWALD
Of the Keizertimes

The McNary High School girls varsity basketball team set out in December with a single goal foremost on their minds: win the Greater Valley Conference.

After taking a loss to South Salem High School in January, the road to a GVC championship got more difficult. Then the Saxons beat McNary again in February.

"After that game, Madi (Hingston) brought us all into the team room and we made a board with new goals on it and what we needed to do," said Kailey Douitt, a McNary sophomore. "Every time we were having a hard day, (Derrick) Handley would point to that board and remind us of what we needed to be doing to meet those goals, one of them was making it to the state tournament." Handley is the head coach of the Celtic girls basketball program.

With a 61-37 win over Newberg High School Friday, March 5, the Celtics accomplished it.

While another team might have written off the rest of the season after losses to the league leaders, senior Reina Strand said that wasn't the case for McNary.

"We could have come back and not tried as hard, but we worked hard as ever every single day," Strand said. "It was a lot of little goals like executing plays and becoming more consistent on defense. Over time we've learned how to balance out offense and defense a lot better."

Because of that recommitment to themselves and each other, the Celts entered the

state tournament on a seven-game win streak. Their first test in the state tournament was No. 1-ranked Jesuit High School. McNary was ranked eighth when the game was held Wednesday, March 9, at Portland's Chiles Center (*see related story Page A11*).

It might sound like a lopsided battle on paper, but the Lady Celts have been in that position before. In December, McNary toppled top-ranked Sheldon High School 78-57. The Keizer girls also aren't strangers to the Jesuit game. During winter break, the two teams met at the Nike Interstate Shootout. The Celts lost 55-33, but it was the fourth game in as many days.

"I don't want to see us back down this time. I want us to play like we deserve to be here. I'm actually looking forward to it," said Hingston.

Handley, who is making his first trip to the state tournament as a player or a coach, said he's benefitted from the steady hands of his assistants in the program this season. Several have played or coached in state tournaments. Throughout the season, two of the assistants were tasked with calming Handley down on the sidelines whenever things got heated.

"Their job is to pull me to the side and tell me what I'm projecting," Handley said. "Early on, they told me to get the message to the girls that the game is exactly the same every time. The hoop is the same height, the rim is the same diameter and the first team that can settle in can get a 5 to 10 point advantage. Our girls have been the ones to do that in almost every game."

In some respects, the new challenges are arriving right

on time, said junior Sydney Hunter.

"We had a lot of opportunities to stop trying or improve this season and we've gotten better. I think, for most of us, it's not just a matter of making it to state anymore, we want to do something while we're there," Hunter said.

Sitting three wins away from

a state title, senior Kaelie Flores said the view was pretty good.

"We've worked up to this point and we're getting recognition from different places. We practiced and we found different ways to defeat different teams. It's so good to get the recognition, but I knew that we could do this from the start," Flores said.

