

CLASS 5A PREP BOYS BASKETBALL

Panthers adjusting to new look

Players get chance to step up in senior *Kyler Fleming's* absence

By **Lukas Eggen**
The Itemizer-Observer

INDEPENDENCE — Together they formed the Central boys basketball team's dynamic duo.

Seniors *Kyler Fleming* and *Kaj Bansen* gave the Panthers a dangerous finisher at the rim (*Fleming*) and a deadly 3-point shooter (*Bansen*), helping Central to a 2-0 start in Mid-Willamette Conference play.

Less than two weeks later, and the Panthers are looking for new players to step up quickly.

Central entered the week tied for first place with the Silver Foxes. The Panthers lost to Silverton 57-48 in overtime and Corvallis 53-36 on Friday and are adjusting to life without *Fleming* who will be out until at least late February after suffering a broken left hand during practice on Jan. 20.

"*Kyler* was a big part of (our offense); he was what they call in football thunder and lightning," Panthers coach *Tim Kreta* said. "He was able to drive to the middle of the key, which really opened up *Kaj*."

Junior *Jarrett Landers* and sophomore *Alec Barba* have



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

Corvallis held senior *Kaj Bansen* to five points during the Panthers' 53-36 loss on Friday.

seen their minutes increase in *Fleming's* absence.

The pair may lack *Fleming's* experience, but *Kreta* said they both bring a unique skill set to the lineup.

"*Jarrett* is a slasher who can finish inside," *Kreta* said. "*Alec* is similar to *Kaj*, a strong shooter. They just need to bring their part to things."

Initially, the Panthers saw success with wins over Crescent Valley and Lebanon on Jan. 21 and Jan. 23 in the games directly following *Fleming's* injury.

Against Corvallis, the Spartans' plan on defense Friday night was simple: "They said we're going to take *Kaj* out of our offense and make the other four guys beat us," *Kreta* said.

But the Panthers aren't looking for *Peterson* or *Barba* to imitate *Fleming*. They're looking to use each player's strength as Central prepares for the second half of league play.

"Some of our younger guys coming up, they know what they have to do now," *Bansen* said. "We don't need them to try and do what *Kyler* did. We need them to do what they do in small chunks. I don't feel like I have to do anything crazy. I feel like we can play the same way."

The Panthers return to the court to face Woodburn Wednesday (today) and South Albany on Friday, the bottom two teams in the league. *Kreta* said the emphasis will be on slowing things down on offense and not letting two losses linger and turn into more.

"We're still in second place," *Kreta* said. "We worked hard to put ourselves in this position. We have the ability to be suc-

Up Next

- Central's boys basketball team hosts Woodburn Wednesday (today) at 7 p.m. and plays at South Albany on Friday.
- The Panthers host Dallas on Tuesday for the teams' second meeting of the season.

cessful. We just need them to have that confidence. That's where the craft of coaching comes in, how do we help mold our players? They have the physical tools, they just need to be confident in those tools."

Fleming will have his injury re-examined the week of Feb. 23, leaving the possibility open he could return — if the Panthers advance far enough into the postseason. That's something *Bansen* said will help drive Central even more down the stretch and turn what could be a difficult setback into a season-defining moment.

"We want him to play again," *Bansen* said. "I had a conversation with him and I said I'm going to try and rally these guys and do as much as I can do to have you play at least one more game."

PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL ROUNDUP

Dallas earns road wins

Dragons look to keep pace in league

Itemizer-Observer staff report

DALLAS — As the Dallas girls basketball team enters the second half of Mid-Willamette Conference play, coach *David Brautigam* knows one thing: Everything is up for grabs.

The Dragons defeated Crescent Valley 38-23 on Jan. 27 and Lebanon 48-35 on Friday to improve to 4-2 in league play, tying them with Central for third place in the league standings before Tuesday night's conference games.

"If your teams are not mentally tough, this league will swallow you up, but we have players on our team who are in their second or third year playing in our league," *Brautigam* said. "I feel we stayed very mentally tough and won two big road games, but now it's time to prepare for Woodburn."

Taylor Fennell hit four 3-pointers en route to a team-high 14 points against Crescent Valley, while *Sarah Zwicker* scored a team-high 15 points against Lebanon.

The Dragons (9-6 overall) hosted Silverton Tuesday after press time and travel to play at Woodburn on Friday.

CENTRAL FALLS IN STANDINGS: Facing the Mid-Willamette Conference's top two teams, Central's girls basketball squad fell to Corvallis and Silverton, dropping a pair of key early-season league games in the battle for first place. The Panthers began their week with a 52-26 loss to Silverton on Jan. 27. Junior *Kylie Nash* led Central with 13



AARON YOST/for the Itemizer-Observer

Junior *Kylie Nash* talks to assistant coach *Jon Carey* during the Panthers' 71-37 loss to Corvallis on Friday.

points. Against Corvallis, the Spartans led 42-12 at the half. *Nash* scored a team-high 10 points, while *Ryanne Huffman* added nine points. The Panthers (9-6 overall, 4-2 MWC) played at Woodburn Tuesday after press time and host South Albany Friday at 7 p.m.

FALLS CITY BOUNCES BACK: Falls City shook off a 73-19 loss to Casco League-leading Country Christian on Jan. 27 by defeating C.S. Lewis Academy's junior varsity squad 48-15 on Friday. Junior *Brittany Varney* scored a game-high 18 points against C.S. Lewis, as the Mountaineers jumped out to a 22-2 lead at the half. *Allison Kidd* and *Shea Coker* added eight points each. Falls City opened its week against Country Christian, which held the Mountaineers to zero points in the first quarter. At 4-2 in Casco

League play, Falls City controls its own destiny to earn the second seed in the league playoffs. The Mountaineers host Livingstone Adventist Tuesday before ending the regular season Feb. 13 at Jewell.

PIRATES DROP THRILLER: Facing the Tri-River Conference's second-place team, the Perrydale's girls basketball team lost a thriller to Regis on Monday, falling 33-31. *Cheyenne Locke* and *Anna McGill* scored eight points each to lead the Pirates, who fell to 4-5 in league play. *Perrydale* began its week by losing to *Kennedy* 58-33 on Jan. 27 before defeating Central Linn 39-20 on Friday. The Pirates look to rebound when they host East Linn Christian Wednesday (today) at 5:30 p.m. *Perrydale* also hosts Western Mennonite Friday at 5:30 p.m.

Falls City: Players learning on the fly

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"It's always been our goal since the beginning of the season," junior *Brittany Varney* said. "Seeing the other teams has made it more realistic."

Varney and senior *Tierra Reynolds* have led the Mountaineers in the scoring column. But freshmen *Drew Ellingson* and *Sarah Ziola*, forced to see significant action all season long, have grown quickly.

"Our younger girls have been improving fast," *Kidd* said. "Our two freshmen are just really smart girls. They used to make freshmen mistakes, checking in and not knowing who they were guarding. Now, when they check in, I'm not focused on them because they are doing their jobs. Our older girls are also doing a better job at being leaders."

With so few players to turn to on the bench, *Kidd* said the team's focused on how to play smarter and how to play when in foul trouble.

With only seven players, *Kidd* said he works hard to keep players rested during the week.

Still, the biggest challenge the squad may face, may not be keeping everyone's energy level up.

"What I'm looking for is more trust from the other players," *Coker* said. "We've been having some small problems with that, but if we trust each other, I think



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

Junior *Brittany Varney* is one of Falls City's most reliable offensive threats.

we can do well in league playoffs then."

As Falls City prepares for its final regular season game against Jewell on Feb. 13, the Mountaineers know they may not have the depth that they are used to, but they're finding ways to make this season a big success.

Competing for one of the Casco League's berths to the

Class 1A state playoffs may not have been on the players' radar at the start of this season, but the Mountaineers are discovering it's not the size of a roster that determines how successful they can be.

"They've been focused on that goal all season," *Kidd* said. "They've never lost confidence and we're getting better every day."

Freshman: Brothers push each other

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"I think it's been pretty average so far," *Sickles* said. "I go out and wrestle and whatever happens, happens."

Entering the season, *Sickles* didn't know how he would fare against new competition. But *Sickles* isn't a typical freshman. With nine years of wrestling experience under his belt, *Sickles* is thriving.

"I've learned how to have a good work ethic," *Sickles* said. "Austin Markee is a great coach. I've had good workout programs that have helped me get to where I am today. I have to get on of-

fense and get the takedown. If you can get the first takedown, you usually win the match."

Now that he's tasted some success, *Sickles* isn't satisfied with original goals.

"(At the start) I was just hoping to maybe go to state," *Sickles* said. "I didn't have too many expectations. I'm thinking I can place at state now. I'm starting to get more confidence."

But *Sickles* isn't the only freshmen making his presence felt for the Dragons.

Earharts

Growing up, freshmen *Treve Earhart* always had his



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

Brothers *Treve* and *Tanner Earhart* have both wrestled varsity in their first year in high school together.

brother, *Tanner*, by his side. Watching *Tanner's* freshman year in 2014, *Treve* said he gained invaluable insight about high school wrestling.

"I learned a lot from his matches," *Treve Earhart* said. "I learned how to get into better position and what he was doing to win

his matches."

Treve Earhart has wrestled at 152 and 160 pounds for the Dragons, where he's won the Herrin Holiday Classic on Dec. 13.

"I'm really happy with what I've seen so far," *Treve Earhart* said. "I started wrestling just to see what I could do. Now, I want to keep getting better and better."

Tanner, who battled a head injury earlier this season, placed fourth at the Tournament of Champions on Jan. 24 and is looking to make a return trip to state. "I've watched them put countless hours in all the

sports in which they participate," *Olliff* said. "They've often had one another, so they've always had to rely on each other to get better."

Now, with the two brothers there to push each other in practice, the pair shares a special bond that helps them stay closer than they ever would be without wrestling.

"It's nice having someone there who I can talk to when I'm feeling down," *Tanner Earhart* said. "We can talk about whatever is on our mind because we know the other is going through the exact same thing."