

NORTHERN NASH HS BOYS BASKETBALL MOVING ALONG



JA'MARZEA WILLIAMS SCORES IN THE PAINT FOR THE FIGHTING KNIGHTS (Photos Submitted by Carl Copeland)

Northern advances to the Final Four

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

NASH COUNTY -- A sarcastic laugh paired with an eye rub and the shake of his head was the first emotion shown by Northern Nash's Henry Drake after the Fighting Knights' head coach was reminded of the school's fourth-round history on Saturday afternoon, fully grasping the magnitude of the moment he knew would soon be coming on Monday evening.

Northern's 67-29 bludgeoning of West Johnston, the Knights' third-round opponent on Feb. 28, pushed the Knights to the all-too-familiar fourth round, resulting in Drake's fourth-career trip to the state quarterfinals.

But of course, Northern had yet to get over the hump and advance to the Final Four at any point during Drake's



NN'S CHRIS SILVER RISES ABOVE THE CROWD

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RED OAK LADY TIGERS -- 2025-26 TRI-COUNTY CONFERENCE CHAMPS

RO Steals The Show

Lady Tigers claim conference basketball crown

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

RED OAK -- One of Nash County's most consistent athletic programs added to its résumé this season, cutting down yet another net after hoisting the Tri-County Middle School Championship trophy.

The Red Oak Lady Tigers basketball team blitzed all three of its playoff opponents en route to the league title, capping off a spotless 15-0 season with a 31-17 victory over Stantonsburg's Speight Middle School in February.

Red Oak rattled off three postseason

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NASH CENTRAL'S HARMONY DUPREE DRIVES FOR A BASKET AGAINST RANDLEMAN (Photos Submitted by Meryn Johnson)

NEW BEGINNINGS

NC should continue to prosper

From Staff Reports

ROCKY MOUNT -- It's over. But in reality, it's only the beginning.

Such is the current status of the Nash Central High School girls basketball team after the Lady Bulldogs were defeated last week in the second round of the Class 4-A State Playoffs.

After rolling through the regular season and winning the Quad County Conference with an unbeaten mark, the Lady Bulldogs didn't exactly receive a favorable draw for the postseason.

So after a first-round bye and a convincing second-round decision, Nash Central found itself facing a familiar foe in



NC'S JELEESA PERRY

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CENTRAL'S HAJUN JANG TAKES THE PLUNGE (Photos Submitted by Meryn Johnson)

Nash Central shines at Class 4-A swim states

From Staff Reports

ROCKY MOUNT -- Nash Central headed into the great pool unknown this winter -- and traveled through the process in successful fashion.

NCHS veteran head coach Kyle Bain didn't know what to expect when the Bulldogs moved to the Class 4-A enrollment level to compete in the newly formed Quad County Conference.

But the NCHS boys won the league championship before taking part in the recent Class 4-A State Championships at the Triangle Aquatic Center in Cary.

Central capped off its

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NASH CENTRAL'S DOMINIC WOZNIAK



NASH CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL SWIM SENIORS (L TO R) RYLEE BREWER, DOMINIC WOZNIAK AND WINSTON LEE



NASH CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR GREAT RYLEE BREWER

SWIM

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sterling campaign by taking eighth-place overall in the team standings at the annual event.

For the Bulldogs, the highlight of the day came when senior veteran Dominic Wozniak finished second in the 50 Freestyle -- just .004 of a second out of first place.

Wozniak, who was also tabbed as the QCC Boys Swimmer of the Year, also medaled in the 100 Breaststroke with a third-place performance.

The senior will undoubtedly go down as one of the top swimmers the exceptional NCHS program has ever produced.

But Wozniak wasn't the lone Bulldog to take part in the states -- other stars were Garret Lewis, Ben Hart, Josh Holloman, Hajun Jang, Winston Lee and Rylee Brewer, who was the lone NCHS girls representative.

"It was a great day for us," Bain said. "I felt like we did pretty well with what we had. Eighth place is a big accomplishment."

Since the regional event was called off due to poor weather, state times were used to crown mythical regional winners -- and Wozniak would have

been a regional champion in the 50 Freestyle.

Also, NCHS would have finished third overall in the boys team standings at the regional level.

Now comes the next test as Central will look to continue to dominate the QCC on the boys level -- while also upgrading its numbers on the girls roster.

Brewer, who was the QCC Girls Swimmer of the Year, will be truly missed, but Bain feels like there are some standouts in the pipeline that will help in the near future.

Given his involvement with youth summer swimming, Bain definitely has an idea of what will be arriving at Central in the coming years.

"Certainly, some of our seniors will be hard to replace," Bain said. "But we also had some good young swimmers, and guys like Josh Holloman, Ben Hart and Garrett Lewis gained some experience for us this year. Those guys will be leaders for us next season."

"On the girls side, we've already gotten some signups for next year, and I definitely think our participation numbers will be up."

NC GIRLS

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the third round in the form of Fairmont -- the club that ended the Lady Bulldogs' campaign in 2025.

History repeated itself as Fairmont stopped Nash Central by a 47-36 margin at the NCHS Gymnasium.

It was an interesting matchup -- and one that could be foreseen for years to come as Fairmont has an all-underclass lineup, while Nash Central boasts three key ninth-grade rotation performers.

The setback not only ended Nash Central's season, it also snapped an eight-game winning streak for Coach Terri Cash's potential-rich squad.

Freshman standout A'dia Cash led the way for the Lady Bulldogs with 13 points to go with eight rebounds, nine steals and four assists.

Seniors JaKayla Gay (11) and Jayden Baggett (9) also enjoyed solid offensive outputs for Nash Central, which closed with a 19-6 overall worksheet.

Gay and Baggett will certainly be hard to replace as Gay became NCHS' all-time leading scorer, and Baggett scored all-around tenacious play while also being able to knock down jumpers.

But it's safe to say that the future is bright for the



NASH CENTRAL'S JAKAYLA GAY

Lady Bulldogs as ninth-graders Cash, Harmony Dupree and Jelesa Perry will provide a nifty foundation for Nash Central to build around.

Certainly, it was a historic campaign for Nash Central after the Lady Bulldogs moved from the ultra-competitive Big East Conference to the Quad County Conference.

While Central had enjoyed success in the Big East, it was a challenge to claim an overall league

crown against larger-enrollment schools.

Playing against foes of similar school size, the Lady Bulldogs dominated in the QCC, winning all but one outing by double digits -- and that contest was a nine-point conquest against a solid Bunn contingent.

Central will now shift its focus to off-season work, and several of the returnees will get more seasoning against quality competition on the travel level.

HOOPS

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tenure, registering an 0-3 record in the fourth round games that the Knights participated in during the winters of 2017, 2019 and 2023.

The ghosts of 2017's fourth-quarter lead that slipped away against Eastern Guilford, those of a comeback that fell short against Eastern Alamance in 2019 or 2023's rockfight loss at E.E. Smith didn't make an appearance at The Castle on Monday though; as it was finally Northern Nash's moment to shine in the postseason.

Behind a career-best 27 points from senior guard Christian Barnes, the Knights raced past the Walter Williams Bulldogs 72-60, securing their first spot in a state semifinal since 1970.

Barnes swiped a team-high four steals defensively, and was met in double figures on the offensive end by fellow senior Jah'Marzea Williams with 13 while freshman whiz Quantay James finished with 12.

James totaled eight rebounds as well, one shy of junior Damonyah Odom who led the Knights with nine boards, while senior seven-footer Chris Silver swatted a game-high seven blocks as well in a strong defensive showing from Northern.

The collective roster heads into the 6A Eastern Final seemingly clicking at the right time, Barnes has been the Fighting Knights' most important piece of armor over the course of the team's playoff run.

Having scored 15, 22 and 27 points during Northern's trio of playoff outings, Barnes has bucketed 11 three-pointers thus far in the postseason, six of which came against West Johnston.

The senior floor general has led the Knights in scoring in its last two games, recording an impressive 11-of-20 (55%) mark from beyond the arc and a 25-of-50 (50%) clip from the floor over the team's three playoff games.

"We've been waiting for that," said Drake of Barnes' third-round effort against West Johnston, one that resulted in a career-high six three-pointers while only taking eight shots from downtown.

"It was a breakout



NORTHERN NASH'S CHRISTIAN BARNES

game and it couldn't have come at a better time."

Barnes and the rest of the Fighting Knights were forced into a quick turnaround, though, as the state tournament always requires.

Northern was allowed to practice on Sunday, a rare exception made by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association (NCHSAA) as a result of changes to this year's playoff format.

After a three-hour rehearsal, the Knights received some much-needed prep work ahead of Monday's headliner against Burlington Williams and followed that up with one day of practice before facing E.E. Smith in the 6A Semifinal in Minges Coliseum on the campus of East Carolina University on Wednesday.

Northern Nash wasn't the only team to participate in this year's state playoffs though, as Nash County counterparts Nash Central and Southern Nash each sent squads to bracket play as well.

The Nash Central boys team made serious strides in Brian Thomas' fourth season leading the

program, reaching the playoffs for the first time since 2019 while winning their first playoff game since 2012.

The Bulldogs topped Fairmont in a 50-48 thriller in the first round prior to falling at Quad County Conference foe Roanoke Rapids in the second round of the 4A bracket, a pesky Yellow Jacket defense too much to overcome in a 51-40 decision.

Another young coach continuing to foster program growth resides on the southern end of the county, with Southern Nash's girls basketball program reaching the playoffs for a second-straight campaign under Tevin Boykin.

Despite a first-round exit at the hands of Durham School of the Arts, the SNHS Ladybirds compiled a 13-11 record, their first year above .500 since 2022-23 and just their second hitting that same mark in the last 20 years.

As of now, the county's only teams still dancing are Rocky Mount's girls squad and Northern Nash's boys, the Knights having participated in their semifinal on Wednesday.

RED OAK

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victories during its race to the conference crown, precluding the championship game with a 50-15 drudging of Springfield in the quarterfinals followed by a 55-27 decision over Rocky Mount in the semifinal.

"The most impressive thing about this team is that they were so committed and locked in each and every game," remarked Lady Tiger head coach Late-sha Wilkins, whose squad won all 15 of its outings by double digits.

A wire-to-wire season of dominance didn't come without its spurts of adversity though, both in the regular season and postseason.

Red Oak's Aria Cook was a top player throughout most of her 2025-26 eighth-grade campaign until she was sidelined due to injury, a season-ending ACL tear that resulted in her missing the last four games of the Lady Tigers' regular season as well as each of the team's three playoff games.

Partially due to Cook's absence, Red Oak found itself trailing for just the second time all season at halftime of the team's semifinal game against Rocky Mount.

That deficit didn't last for long, though, as fellow eighth-grader Calyse Epps bucketed a whopping 25 second-half points to turn the tide against the Lady Ravens in the third and fourth periods.

"We had great leadership and production out of our eighth graders," stressed Wilkins of her upperclassmen, a group that includes Jaliyah Stallings and Savannah Stephens in addition to Cook and Epps.

Stallings (11) and Epps (9) combined

for 20 of the team's 31 points in the championship game, driving the bus for the Lady Tigers in the absence of Cook and Carla Evans, who was injured in the title bout's third quarter.

"All of our ladies contributed and worked hard," reminded Wilkins. "The best thing about this team is that I had so many talented reserves that gave valuable minutes and did not miss a beat."

While Epps and Cook each split time as the team's leading scorer over their three-year careers, each Lady Tiger had a distinct role in the team's success throughout the season.

Stallings' ability to score from anywhere on the court. Evans' consistent intensity and rebounding effort coupled with Rose Little's overall first-year potential.

Tyler Jones and Penelope Bass' defensive acumen as well as the threat posed by Olivia Richardson from beyond-the-arc each helped engineer a special season for Red Oak, the school's first girls basketball title since 2023.

Most impressively, one must remember that the season closed and the team was secured with Cook, the team's leading scorer in 2024-25, unavailable due to injury.

While a hefty chunk of Wilkins' roster is headed off to high school to continue their academic and athletic careers at the next level, things are looking as bright as ever for the Orange and Blue.

"We have a great group that could return next season," emphasized Wilkins.

"I am excited about trying for another championship run."