

Team defense has Warriors in contention for a Big 5 championship

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With three league games remaining, the Del Norte Warriors are right in the thick of an exciting race for this year's Big 5 championship in boys basketball.

After escaping Eureka with a hard-fought 44-40 win last week, in a game that head coach Cris Rice described as a wake-up call, the Warriors are now 4-1 in the Big 5 with everything to play for over the next two weeks.

Arcata and McKinleyville are both also in contention for the league crown headed into the stretch run, and Del Norte will play both of them in the final week of league play.

But a conference title is just one of several goals for this talented roster, which is now 13-4 on the season.

"Our goal is to win the Big 5," Rice said. "And obviously after that we'd like to win the Dick Niclai tournament, and we'd like to win some NCS games. And if we're fortunate enough, we'd love to play in the state tournament."

Rice admits his team will have to pick up its offensive production after a disappointing outing at Eureka, but the Warriors are playing some outstanding defense and that has kept them in just about every game.

Playing strong defense has been a focus for this team since day one and something the coaches and players take pride in.

“It is a pride thing,” Rice said. “For us, a kid taking a charge is better than a kid scoring 25 points. We pride ourselves in stopping the other team’s best player from scoring. It’s just our mentality and our main focus.”

The Warriors have played in a lot of close matchups this season and they always seem to find a way to win them because of that defense, going 5-0 in games decided by 10 or fewer points.

“Our games are close and that’s going to help us in the postseason,” the head coach said.

The Warriors have had to play without defensive standout Caleb Dodson for much of January after he suffered an ankle injury in the league opener against Eureka.

Rice describes Dodson as a “real tough player who can guard anybody,” and is hoping to have him back for the Arcata game, which will be played in Crescent City on senior night.

In their first Big 5 meeting at Arcata, the Tigers got the better of the Warriors 54-41, although Del Norte was missing several players because of COVID protocols.

Several other players have stepped up in Dodson’s absence, including senior Adriel Horton, who has been fire in recent weeks after not playing high school basketball for the past two years.

“I think he’s starting to get more confident,” the head coach said of Horton, who had back-to-back career nights in scoring with 40 combined points in games against Eureka and Fortuna. “I think he’s been super impressive.”

Senior Konner Price also has impressed this season and has been very “calm and collected” on the court, according to Rice, and can play any position.

Price, a forward, switched to point guard for the recent Arcata game, when the Warriors were without all of their guards.

Senior Edwin Zepeda also has impressed in the team’s big league run, as have juniors Wyatt Robson and Nani Scott.

Zepeda has been “awesome,” according to the coach, and a player they have leaned on for much of the season, while Rice says that Scott is the team’s best shooter and that his game has come along substantially since a broken hand slowed his progress early in the season and forced him to start shooting more with his left hand.

Two players better known for their baseball skills — Ethan Thomas and Brody Mattz — also are enjoying big seasons with the team after the head coach convinced them to return to the basketball court this year.

Thomas, in particular, has made his presence felt on defense and has become one of the team’s most reliable defensive stoppers and an “amazing rebounder,” according to the head coach.

The Warriors resume Big 5 action on Friday at Fortuna, before returning home to host Arcata on Feb. 2. They then close out league play with another tough matchup at McKinleyville two nights later.

“We’re excited,” Rice said. “We don’t want to overlook the next game, but we have high expectations.”