

Del Norte girls building momentum as playoffs approach

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The Del Norte girls appear poised for a good playoff run on the basketball court.

With the Eureka Loggers in control in the Big 5 standings coming into the week, winning a league championship might be out of reach for the Warriors.

But a young Del Norte team that has matured about as quickly as anyone could have hoped for still has plenty to play for.

The Warriors should comfortably qualify for the H-DN's postseason Dick Niclai tournament and should also receive a high seed for the North Coast Section Division-4 playoffs.

This week, the Warriors are ranked No. 4 in their division in the NCS, according to MaxPreps, and No. 7 in the state.

They close out league play next week with games at Fortuna on Wednesday and at home to Arcata on Friday, before the Niclai tournament tips off the following week, with the championship game set for Friday night at Lumberjack Arena.

"Our goal is to play at (Cal Poly Humboldt) in that last game of the year going into sections," head coach Justin Clifton said. "And we'll go from there."

The Warriors will have their hands full getting there. It's been a good year for H-DN teams, with Eureka, St. Bernard's and McKinleyville each also highly ranked in the section and state.

St. Bernard's is the No. 2 team in NCS Division 4, one spot ahead of McKinleyville, and both teams are No. 3 and No. 5 in the state, respectively.

The young Warriors, however, appear to have the talent to match up against those teams after splitting two league games with McKinleyville and barely falling by one point in a thriller at St. Bernard's by a score of 42-41 on Saturday.

"The girls are playing tough, they're playing hard," Clifton said. "Our defense and our defensive intensity has picked up from the start of the year."

It's been a learning process for the players, but the head coach is seeing the dividends as we head into the business end of the season.

"We don't play zone, we match up man to man," said Clifton, who believes that prepares his players better for the collegiate game. "Del Norte plays man basketball."

Leading the way on this year's team is junior point guard Lili Nunez, who is playing at an MVP level and has been a handful for opponents all season long.

"She draws the eye from the opposing team," the coach said of Nunez, who scored 10 points in Saturday's loss. "She's got a motor and she just goes."

Senior Gianna Taylor also is enjoying a big season and has taken on more of a leadership role this year, particularly in a recent tough run of games.

Taylor also brings plenty of experience to the team in her fourth year on the varsity roster.

"She's really shown a lot of senior leadership, especially the last couple of weeks," Clifton said. "I'm just proud of what she's doing."

Junior Jacalyn Gorbet also has played a big role on both sides of the ball, and has been among the team's most improved players, while two sophomores— Brooklyn Carter and Lauren Stutes — have stepped up their game this winter and become key components on the team.

"Brooklyn Carter is playing huge for us," the head coach said. "She's playing very good basketball right now and I can't wait to see what she does as a senior."

Carter began to show signs of what she was capable of late last season and "has really taken that leap this year," according to her coach.

Stutes was just called up to the varsity squad early in the season to help fill in when a lot of players were either sick or injured, and she quickly earned herself a permanent spot.

“I moved her up and she did so well I had to keep her up,” Clifton said of the sophomore standout who pulled down 19 rebounds in her varsity debut and has been averaging roughly 10 a game. “She’s an undersized center, but she plays big. She definitely has a presence in there.”