

Oh So Close!

By Meyer Gorelick

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The City College women's basketball team went toe-to-toe with the #2 ranked team in Northern California, Diablo Valley College Vikings on Saturday, March 7, and nearly pulled off an upset to advance to the state finals.

The Rams traveled well, and although it was an away game, City College fans at least equaled the number of Vikings supporters in the bleachers.

Each quarter told a different story and the game swung back and forth wildly throughout the night. After a tense first few minutes, the Vikings went on a run and closed the opening frame up 24-17. A buzzer-beating three-pointer from sophomore forward Katie Osaki kept the Rams within striking distance though.

The Rams took control in the second quarter, taking the lead about halfway through thanks to game-changing blocks from freshman center Becca Tasi, a barrage of buckets from sophomore leaders Jayden Benitez and Vivian Woo and two timely baskets from freshman guard Francesca Cornell.

But the Vikings weathered the storm as first-team all-state forward Nia Johnson kept her team in the game via relentless attacks on the basket. The first half ended in a deadlock, 33-33.

The third quarter was just as tight and intense. It was like seeing two heavy-weight boxers trading blows and refusing to go down.

The Rams' star forward and co-conference player of the year Errayanna Hatfield broke her nose early in the second half. With the season on the line, she courageously checked back into the game after spending a few minutes on the trainers table.

Despite missing Hatfield, the Rams built a small lead thanks to Benitez's outstanding play. She was getting it done in the paint, finishing and-one layups while also splashing shots from deep. But the Vikings again clawed their way back, and finished the third quarter up 54-52.

Turnovers and red hot three-point shooting from the Vikings in the final quarter proved too much for the Rams to overcome. Diablo Valley's aggressive pressing defense forced the Rams into too many give-aways which were turned into decisive points on the other end.

It was a frantic final five minutes, during which the Rams, down double-digits, left everything out on the floor in an effort to come back, but in the end the deficit was insurmountable. The game ended 77-63 in favor of the Vikings.



Sophomore guard Jayden Benitez fights for a loose ball during the fourth quarter at Diablo Valley College on March 7, 2020. Photo by Franchon Smith/The Guardsman

"We played with energy for 40 minutes," Head Coach Derek Lau said. "Unfortunately the balls and the calls weren't falling our way a few times here and there."

"I thought we fought till the end," said Benitez who finished with a team-high 16 points. "DVC is a good team, but it was just a good fight, good game overall."

"They deserved the win tonight," she added about the Vikings.

What a Season

It was clear that all the love the team and its coach expressed for each other after the game were heartfelt and not just lip service. There were lots of moist eyes heading to the locker room after coming devastatingly close to advancing to the state finals.

"It was a fantastic season," Head Coach Derek Lau said. "They were focused, locked in all season long."

"I had a great time with this group, this is a phenomenal group, I'm going to miss this group tremendously," he added.

Woo shared Lau's appreciation of how special this team was.

"They're real ones," said Woo. "We ride or die together all day long. This journey would've been, we wouldn't have gotten this far without them."

Benitez acknowledged that it was going to be hard to let go.

"It was a family," said Benitez. "One of the tightest bonds I've ever had with a team."

"I'm heartbroken honestly," she added. "I'm gonna miss everybody."

Woo and Benitez are both trying to play at the next level, with Benitez in talks with San Francisco State University and Cal State University of Los Angeles.

COVID-19 Steals Title From Undefeated Rams

By Meyer Gorelick

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As the undefeated City College men's basketball team got packed in the film room to travel down to Fresno and earn its state championship, the news started flooding in. After it was announced that the NCAA Tournament was canceled, the writing was on the wall.

When word finally came in that the CCCAA men's and women's state basketball championships were canceled, the team was devastated. "We were hurt," Sophomore wing Quincy Urbina said. "We cried, me along with my teammates." Players wanted their undefeated season to end the way it should... with a title.

"Being 30-0, with a chance to go undefeated, with a perfect season, and not get the chance to play was just devastating," Sophomore wing Emeka Udenyi said.

For the five players committed to play at Division I programs next year it was a major disappointment. The people who took it even harder were the three players who were going to get looked at by coaches and hopefully earn scholarship offers at the state championship.

"They were the ones who were most beat up about it," Head Coach Justin Labagh said. "I felt really bad for them."

While it impacts their recruitment, the silver lining Labagh pointed out is that everyone is impacted, and it's not as if those Division I coaches got the opportunity to go scout other players instead.

"It'll slow things down, but in the end, I think these guys have just such a huge sample size of all this good basketball underneath their belt," Labagh said. "I think once the dust settles they'll probably end up where they're supposed to."

Dominance

Labagh who has been the head coach at City College for 17 seasons and won three state championships said this is "one of the most dominating JC teams" that he has ever seen.

With an average margin of victory of 39 points, the Rams led the state in offense, scoring 101.7 points per game, and were fourth in defense, limiting opponents to 62.5 points per game.

They were deep, featuring 10 unselfish players who could share time, and share the ball. "A guy like Miles Norris, Nate Robinson, even Quincy Urbina, those guys on any other team are playing 35, 38 minutes a game," Labagh said.

"They sacrificed. They gave up points, they gave up minutes," added Labagh.

Udenyi witnessed first hand how this lack of ego elevated the team. "There was

no jealousy on this team, and you don't see that a lot," he said.

Being able to fully utilize the entirety of an ultra-talented roster allowed the Rams to play relentless defense, speed up the game. Given more possessions and superior players, they utterly demolished every team they faced.

Family

Aside from having a rare collection of talent, what made this team unique was its closeness off the court. It's not something that happens every year.

"We can try to create a real positive atmosphere with these guys, but you can't force them to like each other," Labagh said.

When asked what they would miss the most about this team, both Urbina and Udenyi focused on the time spent with teammates. "I can honestly say that when I get married, those guys will be at my wedding," Urbina said. This bond translated to unprecedented success on the court.

"When we went out to play, it was easy. You know, we all were friends and we all wanted to see each other do well," Udenyi said. "This was hands down the best team I've ever been a part of, on and off the court," Urbina said.

The incredible synergy has helped propel the players to not only team success, but individual accolades as well and opportunities to play basketball at the next level.

Awards and Legacy

Sophomore forward Miles Norris was named Coast Conference North MVP and will attend Division I UC Santa Barbara next season.

Udenyi, Urbina, as well as freshman guard Darrion Trammell were named first-team all-conference, while sophomore guard Nate Robinson earned a second-team nod.

Udenyi, Robinson and Trammell will all transfer to Seattle University to compete together at the Division I level.

"I'm excited to get a chance to compete with those guys for a couple more years and see what we can do," Udenyi said. "And hopefully, eventually we can make the NCAA tournament, that'd probably be the ultimate goal."

Urbina will play at Division I Grand Canyon University in Phoenix next year and hopes to make a big impact while he's there. "I want to be remembered as one of the best players ever at Grand Canyon," Urbina said. "I want to make an impact in Phoenix, on someone or something and have it be positive," he added.

Guards Kyree Brown, Ezekiel Holman and Dale Curie are all deep in the recruiting process and hope to make transfers to Division I schools for next season as well. Meanwhile Labagh will be starting almost from scratch and reload for a brand new run at the state title next year.

Rams Advance but Championship Cancelled

By Aminah Jalal

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The Rams defeated the College of the Redwoods Basketball team with a 108-64 win out at their home game March 7, marking a win in the Northern Regional Final.

It was the Ram's 30th consecutive victory in their undefeated season.

Right off the bat, the Rams were on a roll, scoring basket after basket. Despite the Redwood's working the court, the Rams led 53-22 by half-time.

The Redwood's began picking up the pace mid-way through the second half of the game, though not enough to match

the Ram's determined and aggressive stamina which was unflinching throughout the game.

"We played with high intensity and with good energy," sophomore wing Quincy Urbina said. "I believe we're ready."

Sophomore wing Emeka Udenyi led the Rams with 8 points in the first half while sophomore guard Nate Robinson led the Rams with 10 points in the second half of the game. The Rams showed great teamwork in this game as many good shots were scattered among all players.

"It went really well," Head Coach Labagh said. "I thought we got a good

rhythm and that it'll take us into state."

Unfortunately, on Thursday, March 12 the California Community College Athletics Association announced that both the men's and women's basketball state championships were cancelled due to concerns over COVID-19.

(Right) The Rams celebrate after defeating College of The Redwoods on March 7, 2020, to advance to the State Championship playoffs. Photo by Amal Ben Ghanem/The Guardsman

