

Skagway girls top Thunder Mountain, win holiday classic title

All stories by Danny Martin, courtesy of Fairbanks News-Miner

Skagway 53, Thunder Mountain 35

Championship situations have been contagious this year for the Skagway girls basketball team, which captured the title of the Mt. McKinley Bank Holiday Classic with a 53-35 victory over the Thunder Mountain Falcons on Wednesday afternoon at Monroe Catholic High School.

Last March in Sullivan Arena in Anchorage, Skagway lost to Yakutat in the title game of the Class 2A state basketball tournament. Just three weeks ago at Dimond High in Anchorage, Skagway was defeated by Klawock in the title match of the 1A/2A state volleyball tournament.

Seven of the Panthers volleyball players hit the basketball court in Boileau Hall this week.

The Mt. McKinley Classic was the season opener for Skagway, which went 3-0 against 3A competition (Monroe Catholic on Monday) and 4A opponents (Lathrop on Tuesday and Thunder Mountain) despite most of the players having little time to transition from spiking balls over a volleyball net to shooting balls into a basketball net.

“It was totally good because a few of us were really scared because we just got out of volleyball,” said Skagway sophomore guard Rori Leaverton. “All of our starting five only had four days of practice before we got here.

“It was kind of nerve-wracking to show up and see all of these teams; but being able to do this without many practices, and just coming back with our team from last year, is really great.”

Leaverton scored 11 points and was among four Panthers in double figures. Junior guard Kaylie O’Daniel produced a game-high 18 points, senior utility player Jesse Ellis chipped in 12 and junior forward Kaitlyn Surdyk added 10.

Skagway, said co-coach Mark Jennings, benefitted this week from running the same systems it did last season and having the same players from the 2008-09 state runner-up team. The Panthers, though, greatly emphasized defense during their short preparation time for its trip to Fairbanks.

“We obviously emphasized man-to-man defense because that’s been a strong point,” Jennings said. “We like to do some zone stuff. We tried it a little bit but we didn’t have enough time to practice it.”

Shale Kibby’s 10 points paced a Thunder Mountain squad which dropped to 0-7 on the season, but head coach Tanya Nizich was encouraged by her team’s performance in its tournament finale.

“I was extremely proud of the girls; 35 is the most points we’ve scored yet,” Nizich said while watching the Thunder Mountain boys play South Anchorage.

Nizich, a former Juneau-Douglas High School and University of Alaska Anchorage standout, said the Falcons have gotten better at moving the ball around to try to get open shots.

“I have the green light for all the girls to shoot when they’re open,” she said. “One of these days, the shots are going to become more accurate and fall in, and that will be good

for us.”

Skagway 32, Lathrop 23

Lathrop’s defense came through for the Malemites and an 8-0 run during the last three minutes of the fourth quarter was an ally against the Skagway Panthers on Tuesday afternoon in Boileau Hall.

Time, though, was not Lathrop’s friend and Skagway emerged with a 32-31 victory to pull itself one win closer to the girls title in the Mt. McKinley Bank Holiday Classic basketball tournament at Monroe Catholic High School.

Lathrop, a Class 4A program, used a full-court press that helped it overcome a 32-23 deficit against 2A Skagway in the final quarter.

“We had to work really hard to stop the ball and make them get turnovers. We all played a good part in our defense,” said Malemites senior point guard JaNae Anderson, who scored a game-high 15 points while playing with four fouls.

Lathrop’s 8-0 run began with a free-throw by Anderson with 2:47 left in the game.

Whitney Baysinger’s jump shot made it 32-25 with 1:22 left and Alicia Brawley scored four points of seven points Tuesday in a 19-second span (a layup with :57 left and a turnaround jumper with :38 remaining) to narrow Skagway’s lead to three.

Alisha Allen converted a layup with :06 on the clock for the one-point margin. Lathrop regained possession following a pair of missed free throws by Panthers guard Emily Herbig, who had accounted for the game-winning basket.

Lathrop guard Sierra Luke launched a 15-foot shot after the buzzer went off. The ball rolled around the rim and dropped in, prompting a celebration from the Malemites that was squelched after an official ruled no basket because the buzzer had already sounded.

Lathrop head coach Devin Dawkins was pleased with his team’s effort late in the fourth quarter, but he said the 1-1 Malemites missed a lot of easy baskets earlier in the game.

“It’s easily 12 to 14 points that we gave away because we missed easy layups, we missed easy open shots,” Dawkins said. “We came out lackadaisical, and I don’t know if it had anything to do with our performance yesterday.”

Lathrop opened the tournament Monday with a 61-14 rout of Thunder Mountain, a first-year 4A program from Juneau. Skagway faces Thunder Mountain at 3 p.m. today.

“We came out not ready to play, and Skagway came out hungry and they did a good job,” Dawkis said.

Skagway doesn’t see a full-court press often but the Panthers are no strangers to it.

Region rival Yakutat runs it regularly and the Panthers saw it last March in Anchorage during their runner-up finish in the 2A state tournament.

“Their man-to-man full-court defense is something we’ve been working on for a long time and I’m just happy that they stuck it out and did it,” Skagway coach Mark Jennings said.

Herbig’s layup with 3:42 left in the fourth stuck as the shot that lifted Skagway to 2-0 this season and in the driver’s seat for the tournament title.

“Our plan was to push the ball as fast as we could,” said the senior, who contributed four points.

Skagway was led by 11 points each from Jesse Ellis and Rori Leaverton.

Skagway 35, Monroe 30

In the third quarter, the Monroe Catholic girls basketball team seized momentum like a shopper grabbing a bargain at a post-Christmas sale.

Skagway, though, reminded the Rams that there was another quarter left Monday night and the Panthers used those final eight minutes to prevail 35-30 against a Rams squad they held scoreless in first quarter but fell behind 25-22 in the third.

“Once we have the momentum, we’ve got to keep it instead of giving it up,” Rams senior Alicia Mendez, who had a team-high 10 points, said of the loss that dropped Monroe to 1-2 on the season.

The same Monroe team that came up empty in the first — trailing 10-0 — came out on fire in the third quarter with a 17-8 run against the Panthers, who were playing their first game of the season following last season’s runner-up finish in the Class 2A state tournament in Anchorage.

“We just wanted to win, we just wanted to get it back,” said Mendez, who had half of her points in the third.

Gabby Gilbertson and Monica Clark each contributed four points toward the Rams’ 25-22 lead. Emily Anderson’s layup off the glass with 2 seconds left in the quarter accounted for the three-point edge.

The Panthers were just as determined in the fourth quarter as the Rams were in the third. Jesse Ellis, who with teammate Rori Leaverton scored a game-high 12 points, chipped away at Monroe’s lead during the first 4:40 of the fourth quarter. The junior utility player sank free throws with 7:13 and 5:30 left to tie the game and she drained a 3-point shot for the go-ahead score with 3:20 to go.

“We just tried to play good defense, and our shots weren’t falling for us, but we kept shooting anyway,” Ellis said of Skagway’s comeback.

Monroe’s Demi Obermeyer rebounded her missed trey and converted a layup with 2:11 to go to draw the Rams within one, 28-27.

Kaylie O’Daniel, with her only basket of the night, canned a 3-pointer with 1:36 to seal the win for Skagway.

“Hats off to them, those were backbreakers,” Rams head coach Vince Fantazzi said.

Four of Skagway’s six treys came in the second half, and all of Leaverton’s points were scored from beyond the arc. Mendez had Monroe’s two 3-pointers.