

SPORTS

Bradshaw reaches first NorCal final

By Jon Gudel - Sports Editor

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Dangling off a hanger and tucked in the corner of the shirt rack in the office of coach Mike Ruble sits the Sac-Joaquin Section Division V banner. Maybe after winning a third consecutive section title, as the Bradshaw Christian High School varsity girls basketball team did this season, the process of displaying the banner becomes redundant.

Not so, according to Ruble.

His plan is to hang others alongside of it.

Second-seeded Bradshaw inched within one win of making that possible after reaching the Northern California Division V Regional final for the first time in school history with a 50-39 win over Head Royce last Saturday at Bradshaw Christian High School.

Bradshaw will play No. 1 Pinewood in the NorCal championship game on Saturday at Folsom High School. Tip-off is scheduled for 1 p.m.

The winner advances to the CIF state final Mar. 27 in Bakersfield against the Southern California Regional winner.

"It's exciting," said Ruble. "It's a lot of hard work paying off."

As the final seconds ticked away, Bradshaw's fans started chanting, "NorCals! NorCals!" Point guard Fernandi Espinosa, who did not start after spraining her ankle in the first quarter of the quarterfinals, clutched the ball and smiled widely as she handed it to the referee and then immediately hugged her teammates.

In front of a standing-room only crowd for the second consecutive NorCal playoff game, Bradshaw accomplished what had been expected of them the entire season. Reaching the NorCal final is one thing. Doing so with a target placed squarely on their backs after a section three-peat is another.

With more than 90 percent of the offense returning from last year's team and Ruble, who coached the boys and girls' teams to section titles last season to become the first coach to achieve that feat in section history, deciding to return after declining an invitation to be an assistant coach at Seattle University, Bradshaw entered the 2009-10 season as a favorite to represent the section in NorCal and possibly state finals.

"This is what the girls wanted," said Ruble, specifically referring to a rematch with Pinewood. "If you want to be the best, you have to beat the best."

Bradshaw advanced to the NorCal semifinals last season before being eliminated by Pinewood. For most of this postseason, opponents had offered minimal resistance.

After winning the first five playoff games by 34 points or more and using a running clock due to a 40-point lead in the first four, Bradshaw finally was forced to play four meaningful quarters.

In the end, it still didn't matter.

Bradshaw led by as many as 16 points in the second half and, although Head Royce cut that margin to eight with 1:08 left in regulation, Lauren Beyer's layup and free throw six seconds later stretched the lead back to double digits and seemingly sealed a trip to the next round.

"They're a good team. They played against some really good teams," said Ruble of Head Royce. "They are well-coached. It really helped to be at home in front of this crowd. That's why I really wanted for us to get two home games. It was electrifying. It was a big deal for us to host. To have that crowd behind you, it's a big deal."

Amazingly, Bradshaw had never trailed in the playoffs so far this season. They led for 167 consecutive minutes until Head Royce snapped that streak with a 12-10 lead late in the first quarter.

It only lasted 53 seconds.

Bradshaw scored the final four points of the first and extended it to 13 straight to turn a two-point deficit into a 23-12 lead. Head Royce did not score in the second quarter until 3:38 left.

Bradshaw maintained a 10- to 12-point difference for the entire third quarter and then pushed it to a game-high 16-point margin on Jordie Smith's corner three-pointer on the first possession of the fourth.

"We made some silly turnovers early on," Ruble admitted. "But we try to live in the moment. 'Okay, that was a turnover. Now, let's get back on defense.' The girls do a great job of pushing that stuff aside. We just make adjustments."

Mostly it's the opponents having to make adjustments to try to contain Bradshaw. It hasn't worked very often.

Part of the problem is Bradshaw possesses a physical low-post tandem - Cheyenne Williams and Beyer - as well as four capable outside shooters - Ashlee Jones, Breanna McKenzie, Espinosa and Smith.

Beyer scored a game-high 15 points, and Jones had 11.

"We definitely want to be versatile," said Ruble. "You have to have multiple ways to score. Teams are so well prepared these days, especially at this level whether it's Divisions one or five. The girls do a great job of sharing the ball."

As for that section banner still waiting for a home on the gymnasium wall, Ruble said, "We're hoping to hang up a couple more banners along with it."

Saturday is the first chance to do so.

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