

Second Place – Good or Bad?

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Bleacher Talk

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Second place isn't somewhere most people like to end up, but that does not mean that it is all bad. Take the case of the Gallup High basketball teams in the season just finished.

The girls' team had losses to just two teams: 6A Clovis at their tournament on the east side of the state, and two losses to Los Lunas, one regular season and one in the final game of the state tournament. The boys did even better, though they lost to two teams as well; the opening game of the season back in November and in the last game of the state tournament. Some may view these as mere excuses. I don't!

Domonic Romero, boys' head coach for seven years, and Kamau Turner, girls' head coach, are similar in many ways, both growing up as coaches in Gallup, so to speak, over the past years. Both are laid back, but very focused on the court, and in practice.

Romero was Gallup-raised, a superb athlete himself, while Turner took a more round about journey to Gallup, playing college ball in York, NE before accepting positions at San Jon and Newcomb, NM, Elkhart, KS, and Coronado High in Gallinas, NM before arriving here. Turner has already led one of his Bengal teams to the state championship, while Romero has another second-place trophy to call his own in that big game.

Although their reasons and responses are different to the question, "How does it feel to come in second at state," both appear valid to an extent not fully recognized or understood by their vociferous fans.

Romero was pleased with the second place state finish, Turner not so much.

"Centennial High School was granted a waiver by the NMAA for two more years to stay in Class 5A because they are a new school - though they have well over two thousand students, almost twice the student numbers allowed for that classification (1,200)," stated Romero. "And they out-sized us a lot. We were down by only five points to start the fourth quarter, and we had opportunities, but our tallest player was about 6-2. They had four players at 6-5 or 6-6."

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“Our district also required that our players put school first, with being in their own homes a close second. That meant we travelled back and forth since the tournament alternated days of play between the girls and boys.

“I’m pleased with the kids for coming in second under these conditions. This year was one of the most decorated teams from Gallup High with 29 straight wins, losing only the first and last games of the season.”

There are four large public high schools in Las Cruces. The other three are 6A and the teams from them have always been perennial contenders and champions in most sports, especially the top three: football, basketball and baseball.

Despite the disadvantage in height, Romero’s teams have won district titles in five of the seven years he has been head coach, despite the lack of size that opponents always seem to bring to the floor. The team also set a state record this year for the largest comeback in the state playoffs, 24 points against archival Farmington, a four-time opponent this last season. Gallup also played another rival, Grants, four times in the same season and the Bengal boys won all eight games, which is not easy, either.

The Chicago-born Turner said that this time the win was for the team.

“I’m proud of the kids. The officiating changed and we got in foul trouble in the second half. We were not able to score because of charge calls, and the back and forth travel that affects the legs. Our best players fouled out.”

This writer would point out the fact—from his years of experience wearing striped shirts—that the myth about officiating not affecting the outcome of a game is just that, a myth. Officials can (and the worst ones do) alter the game flow and the eventual winner in many cases. Officials are human, too, and it is easy to blame them for a multitude of errors, as they make split-second decisions, but they are not entirely without fault. Or haven’t you ever yelled at a referee before? The Gallup girls have been a recognized force in the state for years, and still maintain that respect from opponents where ever they play. The boys are not far behind.