

Bengal Ladies putting up big numbers, and wins

Written by By Tom Hartsock Sun Correspondent
Friday, 05 February 2016 03:56



This year's edition of the Bengal Ladies' Basketball Team is doing what is expected of them by coach Kamau Turner and the fans that follow them everywhere. Girls' basketball in New Mexico has been growing in popularity, especially in the Four Corners area, where Gallup, Shiprock, Kirtland, Ramah and others within this geographic region have brought home the coveted Championship titles in almost all of the last 20-30 years. And the faithful fans follow the teams.

Dan Salzwedel, the former head of the NMAA, once remarked to this reporter that if he had a wish it would be that every state basketball tournament, boys and girls, be populated as much as possible by all high schools of every size from the Four Corners. His reasoning was simple; the fans could and did fill the Pit for the games, even if their particular school was not playing.

Since Gallup High was and almost still is the largest and oldest school in this area, their fans are even more fan-atical than normal. The Bengal Ladies have even packed away games, causing one Farmington coach to remark, "We played in our gym, but it felt like we were the visitors."

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At 18-0 this year (through Feb. 1) the Gallup team is having one of their better seasons. The team has scored 1,326 points in those games (an average of 73.66) while holding their opponents to a mere 943 (average 52.39). Individual player stats will not be available until the end of the season. Coach Kamau Turner does not want his players concerned about details like that.

“We continue to not worry about our record,” said the seventh year coach. “We must continue to defend, play hard, and get the last win of the season (the championship game). We need to continue to do a good job on the court and find ways to win.”

Turner has been there before, twice. He’s got a state championship win and a loss. He is not interested in being a runner-up again.

“One thing I found out last year,” Turner explained, “is that losing in the championship game does not feel any better than losing in the quarter finals.”

Gallup will lose six players to graduation this year, which is about normal for high school varsity teams. Those seniors are, alphabetically: Brittany Bahe, Shenoah Begay, Camille Etsitty, Cori Gordon, Ni’Asia McIntosh, and Deerae Torrez. Four juniors help to fill some of the slots: Paige Juan, Kalisha Kinsel, SaraAnne Shirley, and Rhiannon Singer, while two sophomores, Journey Gilson and Leona Smith, and freshman Ashley Antone complete the 2015-16 Bengal varsity package.

Speaking of packages, one arrived for Turner during the practice Feb 2. It was the Hall of Fame banner from NMAA to hang on the wall of the Bengal gym for Justina Prairie Chief, who coincidentally came to play for Gallup the first year Turner was the girls’ coach.

“Wait for the eighth-graders and freshmen coming up in the JV and C-team ranks,” Turner said. Anthony Sanchez coaches the JV and Alicia Smith the C-team and both are doing very well. “I’ll get my Master’s degree in April from Grand Canyon University and I want to move into administration, but would have to give up coaching in this district. Maybe I could get an administrative position in Window Rock or somewhere close and still be able to get back for practice every evening.”

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The first sentence makes some fans want to see these younger girls play, and the district rules don't make a lot of sense when they penalize smart, capable people from doing a better job in education. Bureaucracies are often that way.

Another district regulation are the travel restrictions that hurt our GMCS team's exposure and schedule strength. Although the Gallup girls' are listed at number one on MaxPrep for the state, they are only ranked 97th nationally because of that restriction. Meanwhile, Grants and Kirtland both sent teams to California over the Winter Break, while the Bengal ladies had to content themselves with sitting home, reading about those games, and wondering how they would have fared against that competition.