

NJCAA DIVISION II NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

The Lake Michigan College women's basketball team prepares for practice on Thursday. The team will open competition in the NJCAA Division II National Championship on Tuesday.

NATIONALS x2

Red Hawk women in a familiar place

By AUSTIN BORNHEIM
HP Sports Writer



First game

- ▶ Lake Michigan College vs. Parkland College
- ▶ 2 p.m. Tuesday
- ▶ Watch online at <http://www.ihigh.com/jccc>

Appearances in the national tournament for the Lake Michigan College women's team are nothing new.

The Red Hawks have been there the past two seasons and even won the NJCAA Division II championship in 2010. But this year? With nine freshman

and just one returning player? LMC proved early doubters wrong with an impressive regular season and two convincing wins in the District G tournament to punch its third straight ticket to the tournament — answering questions on whether or not the new lineup could maintain the program's success.

"So many people underestimated us at the beginning of the year, and it just feels great to prove people wrong," said LMC's lone returner, DeYahna Styles.

This year's team hasn't just maintained the program's success, they've had one of its best seasons in recent years. It matched the 2011-12 team for the best regular season record of the past five years while compiling a 15-game winning streak in the process.

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Lake Michigan College women's basketball coach Jason Cooper works with his team during practice Thursday.



Lake Michigan College's men's basketball coach Doug Schaffer talks to his players during practice Thursday. The team opens up NJCAA Division II National Championship play on Wednesday.

Defense a priority for LMC men

By AUSTIN BORNHEIM
HP Sports Writer

Players sprinted across the court, closing out on their man with such intensity it seemed they were in a season-deciding game.

Lake Michigan College's men's team emphasizes closing off driving lanes and help side defense.

With the Red Hawks' recent success, particularly on the defensive end, it is no surprise the players are moving a step quicker.

Guard Ken Coates said the team is working harder on defense, which is in turn paying dividends on offense.

"All of that gradually evolved into us making the jump from just being a little bit short to being the better team on the floor," coach Doug Schaffer said.

The improvements have LMC headed to the NJCAA Division II national tournament this week. But less than 14 days ago few, if any, outside of the Red Hawk locker room would have anticipated their run through the district tournament.

The Red Hawks will open tournament play against Phoenix College at 2 p.m. Wednesday at Danville Area Community

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LMC WOMEN

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“Coming off of a team that was loaded with a lot of talent the last two years where we have gone to the national tournament, the expectations are, ‘Hey, come out here and do our best and see what we can do,’” coach Jason Cooper said. “And this year, these girls have really responded to coaching and we are back at the pinnacle of our level.”

Despite a 15-game win streak that spanned over the tail end of December, the entire month of January and well into February, the season wasn’t without its struggles.

With a chance to capture the regular season MC-CAA Western Conference title outright on the road against Kalamazoo Valley Community College, the Red Hawks lost, 62-56.

It ended the win streak and made the two teams even in the division where they eventually finish co-champions. A week later, LMC lost to St. Clair County in the MCCA championship game, 84-73. The Red Hawks missed out on milestones they had hoped to accomplish, but gained experience in big games, something the team sorely needed.

“Those are probably the two biggest moments these players have had in their career,” Cooper said of the two late-season losses. “It was a learning experience and once we got past that hurdle ... that was an opportunity for us to get better and improve ourselves for the tournament.”



Don Campbell / HP staff

Lake Michigan College's Lexi Hobbs takes a shot during practice Thursday.

Six days after the loss to St. Clair, LMC crushed Grand Rapids and blew by Glen Oaks to win the district tournament and return to the national tournament where they will play Parkland College at 2 p.m. Tuesday in Overland Park, Kan.

Cooper says the two teams are very similar and that Tuesday’s game will come down to who “imposed their will on the other.”

“We are going to have to run the floor, rebound well since we are undersized. They are very big in each

position,” he said. “We are going to have answer that call of physical play and then get out and do the things we do, like getting out and getting to the basket and help each other get easy buckets.”

The Red Hawks will lean on Styles to get the team up the floor in transition and to be the vocal leader. As the only player back from last season’s team, the sophomore took on the leadership role out of necessity.

“At the beginning, it felt like more of a pressure role because I have experienced

coach Cooper for a year and I know what he expects,” Styles said. “Now we are deep into the season so now they know what to expect from him and what he expects from us as players.”

For scoring, LMC relies on freshmen Lexi Hobbs, the District G Western Conference Player of the Year, Sabrina Trujillo and Kaitelyn Smith. Hobbs is averaging just under a double-double with 14.8 points per game and 9.3 rebounds, Trujillo is averaging 11.4 points per game and shooting 33 percent from 3-point, and Smith has solidified the post position.

“You don’t know who’s going to have the best night. Teams can’t key on a single player per se,” Cooper said. “We’re an unselfish team, and we have learned how to play well together.”

Now, the Red Hawks will face moments bigger than both the Kalamazoo Valley and St. Clair games. But Cooper is trying to keep it simple.

“We’re just telling them, ‘This is a huge moment, an exciting moment, but this is a game you have played for a long time. All the extra curricular things that are going on around the game are fun, enjoy them. Enjoy the experience. But when you step between those lines, do what you have done all your life. Play hard, play together, play with focus, play with determination and hard work. And where we are at the end of the game when the clock says zero, hopefully we are on top if we did those things.’”

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Don Campbell / HP staff

The Lake Michigan College men's basketball team runs through practice Thursday.

LMC MEN

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College in Danville, Ill.

LMC was the sixth seed entering the MCAA District IX tournament with an underwhelming 7-9 conference record. The Red Hawks then reeled off three straight wins to capture the district title for the first time in eight years.

"I believe we surprised, certainly the teams in our own conference, being the sixth seed coming out of the regular season. But as a team, we always believed that we weren't that far behind, even though our record and our seeding were lower than we wanted it to be," said Schaffer, who is in his 13th season as coach. "The number of close games and how we competed with everybody gave us the confidence that if we just didn't get too discouraged by those tough losses we could beat anybody in the post-season. And that's exactly what we did."

The Red Hawks saved their finest defensive effort to date for top-seeded Glen Oaks in the semifinals.

LMC held the duo of Lee Gardner III and Angelo Griffis, who were averaging a combined 45.6

points per game, to just 26 in a 71-52 win.

"That effort of shutting down their two best players and containing everyone else really was kind of the bench mark point of the season from a defensive standpoint," Schaffer said. "I think that carried into Saturday's championship game against Lansing."

Lansing was averaging 88 points per game, but the Red Hawks were able to limit the Stars to 78 in a 13-point win.

"The old mantra of defensive and rebounding wins championships, in our case, turned out to be correct," Schaffer said.

At the center of LMC's team is a core of home-grown players.

Of the 12 players on the roster, six are from Benton Harbor, two hail from St. Joseph, with Niles and Bridgman also represented.

"It brings the gratification to a whole other level. You look up and down that roster and see local high school after local high school. You don't see that very often at the community college level, especially among smaller rural schools like we are," Schaffer said.

The 2004-05 team that

went to the national tournament was also loaded with local players.

"That shows there is still a high quality level of basketball in Southwest Michigan," he said. "That is another special thing about this team: duplicating what that team did, and now we obviously want to go a little deeper in the tournament."

The leadership roles fall upon sophomores Roy Napier, Loren Johnson and T.J. Scott, who joined a team that had finished last in the district the year before. They were part of last year's team that finished 12-15 and, as part of this year's team "infused with talent," have help bring the Red Hawks to where they are now.

"They were a big part of us turning this program around from basically being at the bottom and making us credible last year," Schaffer said. "We don't have an official captain or co-captains or tri-captains, but if we did those three would certainly probably be labeled that."

The three Benton Harbor natives might be the leaders of the team emotionally, but another Benton Harbor product guides LMC's offense.

Freshman Ken Coates is

averaging 21.7 points per game and is the driving force behind the Red Hawks' offense.

He's scored in double figures all but one game and has posted six double-doubles. But Coates doesn't want to be thought of as a scorer. Instead he rather be thought of as a team player.

"It's easy for me to score sometimes, and my teammates do a good job of getting me the basketball at the right times," Coates said. "Being the guy who is looked to to score is all new to me. I'm just trying to have fun while it's happening."

Coates might be scoring upwards of 20 points a game, but Schaffer and his message of defense first has Division II's 18th-leading scorer talking about the other end of the floor and how that is how the Red Hawks will continue playing through the end of next week.

"Defense man, I can't get enough of the defense," said Coates, the District IX Most Valuable Player. "We can't break down and need to stay a family, brothers. If we do all of those things, the offense will come."

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