

https://www.valleybreeze.com/sports/np-girls-basketball-team-defeats-central-for-third-d-iii-victory/article_6c00e806-91c4-11ed-8f91-cf7caaf96716.html

NP girls' basketball team defeats Central for third D-III victory

By ERIC BENEVIDES Valley Breeze Sports Editor sports@valleybreeze.com

Jan 18, 2023



North Providence senior guard **Morgan McGrath**, #4, tries to steal the ball from Central junior point guard **Gabriella Rosario** during the second quarter of last week's Division III matchup at the Cougars' gym. The Cougars picked up their third victory of the season by rolling to a 44-22 victory.

Breeze photo by Eric Benevides

NORTH PROVIDENCE – When the North Providence High girls' basketball team concluded its COVID-shortened 2021 season with just eight players, four of them seniors, the prospects of putting a competitive squad on the court for the 2021-22 season looked very grim for the program.

A town away, Johnston High, which had just seven of its 10 players returning, also felt the numbers crunch, and as a result, both programs decided to take the court as a co-op squad last winter.

Amazingly, both schools saw larger-than-expected numbers sign up for the program, which ended up fielding not only a varsity squad that won four games in Division II, but also separate North Providence and Johnston junior varsity teams.

Thanks to those big turnouts, the Cougars and the Panthers are going solo again this winter. North Providence, which has 18 players in its program, is back in the Division III ranks, while Johnston, which has just 13 players on its roster and no junior varsity squad, is playing in the RIIL's new Division IV.

The Cougars, who began last season with 25 players in the co-op program (14 of them freshmen), have the youngest squad in their 10-team division, with only three seniors and a junior in it, but 10 sophomores.

Being such a young team, "there are still a lot of things to work on," added second-year NP head coach Stacy Pokora. "But they are a good bunch of girls. They have a lot of heart; they have a lot of fun, and they have a good camaraderie going."

Senior guards Morgan McGrath, who rejoined the program after taking last year off, and Graycen Pappas and junior forward Andrea Vasquez are the captains. Pappas, who has yet to play this winter because of an injury, is returning for her fourth season, and McGrath and Vasquez are back for their third.

The only other upperclassman on the roster is senior guard Carly Acciaioli, who is a newcomer to the program, but has played on the school's girls' soccer team.

Of the sophomores, the best of the bunch may be guards Lusine Hagopian, who was one of the co-op squad's top players off the bench, and Riddhi Mistry, an outside shooter who played a lot of JV last year.

Another sophomore guard, Catherine Nicolo, also saw some varsity time last year, and sophomore center Elyse Brassard, has been in the starting lineup. Among the freshmen on the team are guards Makenna Heon and Alivia Toe.

The Cougars are currently 3-5 in D-III, which shrunk from 18 to 10 teams and contains holdovers such as Pilgrim, which sits in first place with an 8-1 record, Lincoln, North Smithfield, Middletown, Toll Gate, Exeter/West Greenwich, Narragansett, and Burrillville. Central, which is down from D-II, rounds out the division.

And speaking of Central, that's who the Cougars hosted last Tuesday, Jan. 10, and defeated by a 44-22 score to pick up their third win of the season. The Cougars rattled off the game's first 14 points, took a 26-8 lead at halftime, and never looked back in the second half, as Pokora gave her bench players plenty of time on the court.

"I really wanted to test out some of my jayvee girls, so I put them out there and gave them an opportunity to show me if they knew the plays and things like that," Pokora added. "They did a great job, and I was impressed with some of their skills."

Vasquez delivered eight points and 11 rebounds to lead a balanced offensive attack that also saw McGrath sink two first-quarter three-pointers and end up with seven points and Hagopian and Heon each score six.

Defensively, the Cougars also helped force the Knights to commit a whopping 38 turnovers, as Vasquez had four steals and Mistry, McGrath, and Hagopian each added three.

One of the Cougars' finest performances of the season came in their first victory of the winter, a 43-35 win on Wednesday, Dec. 14, at home over Middletown, which entered this week with a 5-3 record and in a tie for third place in the standings.

Hagopian, who sank five-three-pointers and scored a career-high 28 points, all in the final three quarters, "had a really great game," said Pokora. "She's our big three-pointer shooter, and when she's on, she's on."

Four nights before defeating the Knights, North Providence notched a 38-33 victory at home over Burrillville, as Hagopian scored a game-high 18 points and Heon tossed in a career-high 16. They provided all the offense in the first half to help the Cougars roll out to a 22-16 lead.

"They were a big team," Pokora said of Burrillville. "To be honest, when they first came out, I didn't know who was a guard and who was a forward."

The Cougars, who will visit Middletown tonight at 7 p.m. and host Narragansett on Friday at 5:30 p.m., also suffered a 41-29 loss at home last Thursday night to Exeter/West Greenwich. The bulk of the Cougars' points came from Hagopian, who scored 15 points, and Mistry, who added 12.