SHARKS HEAD TO THE FINAL FOUR

When the 2024-25 began back in November the Ponte Vedra Sharks were tabbed the Number One team in NE Florida. Now --- we know why.

With a schedule that included the likes of University Christian, Impact Christian, Ribault, and Jackson, all teams joining the Sharks at the Final Four in Lakeland, there was very little chance that coach Ben Wilson’s 2024-25 team could survive that gauntlet of a schedule without a setback or more.

There would be a few bumps in the road as the Shark’s focused on climbing to the top of their game as March rolled around, but by playing those talented teams, maybe that original rating of number one in our area was spot on. The Sharks hit a rough stretch as the New Year rolled around as they dropped four of five games, including a big loss to number one ranked Jackson on January 14.

With still plenty of basketball left in the season the Sharks would bounce back --- and did they ever! The Sharks kept improving game by game, with one of their victories over a Ribault team that had just defeated top ranked Jackson.

The win over that very talented Ribault team in the final game of the regular season set the Shark’s up perfectly for the upcoming playoffs. PV easily dumped tournament host Ed White 61-40 to set up a district final with St. Augustine. The Yellow Jackets, coached by former PV basketball coach Marcus Perez that won 18 games on the season, were no match for the Sharks as they held St. Augustine to but 30 points in a 49-30 victory.

The Sharks then hosted three teams in the Division 5 Regional, all held at the Shark Tank. All three teams were talented and athletic but were no match for the inspired Sharks who will now head to Lakeland as regional champs for an unprecedented fourth straight year.

To say that Ponte Vedra is now playing their best basketball of the season is clear to all who have followed the Sharks this season. Coach Ben Wilson has fielded a seven-man rotation that is clicking on all cylinders.

And clearly playing at the top of his game is their senior leader David-Sanchez Barrara. The 6’3 playmaker scored nearly 20 points per game in the regionals, but that only begins to scratch the surface as to his value to this team. The regional championship victory over Tallahassee Leon was typical of his playoff run. David scored 16 points, had nine assists, seven rebounds, three steals and was the leader in breaking a desperate Leon full court press in the game’s final eight minutes. Often, one could look at the stat sheet and would be led to believe that many of those nine assists were easy two-handed chest passes to a nearby teammate who would make a shot. Not so for Barrara’s assists as many were stunning pinpoint passes that drew many oohs and ohs from the crowd.

Coach Wilson can deprive satisfaction that David’s teammates are also peaking at the right time. 6’5 Maddox Palmer, maybe the most athletic of all the Sharks, whose drives to the basket have been nearly unstoppable during the current stretch, has been key to the PV run. 6’9 junior Trace Westercamp continues to improve daily. His 13 points and his physical presence near the rim helped pave the path to Lakeland. Already a very good shooter from out court, once Trace develops some low post moves over the off-season, the sky is the limit for him at the next level.

Surely one of the big stories of this year’s team has been the play of their shortest player, 5’9 Alex Katsikas. A zone-buster extraordinaire, Alex has broken many of hearts of opposing teams with his deadly three-point shooting. Katsikas has connected on 44% of his attempts this season beyond the arc, a percentage unmatched in program history. In addition, Katsikas has been more than adept at handling the ball as he has committed an average of less than one turnover per game.

The above four player mentioned are the leading scorers for the Sharks, but a good team isn’t complete without others who play a role. Juniors Noah Simmons, Ryan Speace and senior Paul Burkhardt have more than done their part. The 6’5 Burkhardt was a starter before the first of his two head injuries kept him sidelined for several games during the season. Burkhardt never takes a bad shot and has been a force on defense and in rebounding. When Maddox Palmer went to the sidelines in the regional championship game against Leon, Burkhardt came in and in just five minutes of action scored three points and pulled down four rebounds.

Noah Simmons began the season on the bench nursing an early injury but has since moved into the starting lineup. Simmons will not break any scoring records but like Burkhardt, knows his role and seldom takes a bad shot. The stocky playmaker has done a nice job in moving the ball around on offense as well as full filling his role in breaking a full court press.

Junior Ryan Speace has displayed some lightening quick hands and is a pest on defense. Speace has also displayed consistent ability in driving to the basket as witnessed by his clutch fourth quarter drive in the win over Leon. Not to be forgotten, but one who will surely be a valuable player for next year’s team is 6’6 sophomore Chase Cowan. Coach Wilson has not been hesitant in using the young sophomore in key moments when one of his big men get into foul trouble or in need of a break. Cowen’s muscular frame has produced some big rebounds during the season. With some fine tuning over the summer months, Cowan’s is sure to see a lot of playing time in his junior season.

The one very puzzling drawback for Shark fans who are thirsting to see their next game at the final four in Lakeland is the long wait until their next game. The Sharks will have to sit for 13 days before their semi-final game against Leesburg, a space between games that baffles this old timer. This will mark their fourth visit to the final four. This diehard Shark fan believes that the current Shark team has the components to bring the championship trophy back home to Ponte Vedra. However, we’ll have a long wait.

Submitted by Jim Moyes