

Knights grow up fast in trip to state tournament

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SLEEPY EYE - After finishing last season 15-13, the Sleepy Eye St. Mary's boys' basketball team didn't get a lot of attention heading into this year.

The Knights returned many pieces from last year's team, and with a team full of younger players, they knew that this year could be a big one for them.

"We knew the team we had coming back and we weren't really a team that was getting talked about a lot," coach Judd Walter said. "I think people knew that we were going to be solid, but we hadn't proved anything yet. But I think the guys had a great desire to win the conference. The first day of practice, I said 'conference champs, section champs, that's our goals.' Now we gotta reset it, we have bigger things in mind. A few years ago, we were trying to win games. Now we have bigger goals."

The team accomplished both feats this year, earning a Tomahawk Conference title with a record of 14-2 in conference play, then they knocked off BOLD, Lester Prairie, Cleveland and St. Clair en route to winning their first Section 2A title since 2006.

The Knights are 19-3 and will play Central Minnesota Christian (18-4) at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday at Mankato East.

"We just used that as motivation, the past few years we haven't been doing anything and this year we stepped it up," junior Trent Steffensmeier said. "We had a bunch of good players, we were just ready this year."

The Knights enter state tournament play on a nine-game winning streak. Their last loss was on February 26 at home against Minnesota Valley Lutheran, a team they lost to twice this season.

They are led by junior Carson Domeier, who averages 23 points per game. He also averaged seven rebounds, five assists and shot 45% from 3-point range and 55% from the field. He also averaging 29 ppg in the playoffs. Steffensmeier is next, scoring 17 ppg, 5 rpg and 1.5 steals and sophomore Kaleb Wait averages 14 points, 5 rebounds and three assists. Post player Kyle Goblirsch averages 6 ppg and 6 rpg and Jacob Lux averages 6 ppg and 7 rpg.

Central Minnesota Christian is led by Case Mulder, who is averaging 19.7 ppg. Ben Van Eps (15 ppg) and Blake Greenwaldt (13 ppg) also lead the way for the Bluejays.

"They are a well coached team with good balance," Walter said. "They have four guards that can all shoot it well and handle the ball. Very similar to our team in size, 6-foot-3 being their biggest starter. Man-to-man defense is their typical defense, they defend well at every position. I think a key for us will be defending their guards, they shoot the 3-pointer well and have a couple guys that can get to the rim."

The St. Mary's girls basketball team also made the state tournament and will play at 5 p.m. on Wednesday at Mankato East. Needless to say, this is a big week at St. Mary's High School.

"We had to match the girls this year, so we had to get there," Wait said.

Walter said that both teams have supported each other all year when they're able to.

"We support each other and we know that there's open gym and it's open for both genders and just to see them win, it's just awesome for the school," Walter said.