



Photos by Craig T. Greenlee
Marsaeeds Carter of Plymouth (in blue) is pressured by Prep's Kayla Robinson and Christina Caesar (right).

Title

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players scored eight or more points.

Game day just happened to be Mychala Wolfe's birthday and she celebrated by leading her team in scoring with 13 points, which included three 3-pointers. Kayla Robinson contributed 10 points and 5 rebounds and Craig, the championship game MVP who has signed with East Tennessee State, finished with 10 points and 5 assists.

It didn't take long for Prep to seize control of the game. Plymouth packed the paint with its 2-3 zone defense in an effort to nullify post players Chrisalyn Boston and Kristian Saunders. The Phoenix countered with reliable outside shooting. Wolfe and Robinson converted a couple of 3-pointers apiece to

help their team build a 21-10 lead by the end of the first quarter.

"I saw that they were playing zone and that they were rotating slow," said Wolfe, who shot 50 percent from 3-point distance (3-of-6). "So when my teammates skipped me the ball, I was open and I took the shots."

Plymouth, in the meantime, struggled to navigate through the pressure, especially after Prep switched from playing man to a 1-3-1 three-quarter court zone trap. The defense was so effective that the Vikings shot just 23.1 percent from the field in the first half. The second quarter, in which they scored only three points, was very problematic.

It's not that Plymouth (29-2) didn't know what was coming. It was more a matter of not being able to make the right adjustments.



Coach Eugene Love delivers instructions from the sidelines during the Class 1-A final in Chapel Hill last week.

"We've played other teams that press like they do," said Lamont Gilliam of Plymouth. "But they were really good. They had people in the right spots and they forced us to the sidelines."

The top performer for

the Vikings was 6-4 center Brittany Franklin who had 14 points, 13 rebounds, five steals and two blocked shots. Daneya Rouson chipped in with 12 points and three assists.

The most disruptive factor for Prep's defense

was Dominique Claytor, a 5-9 swing player who recently returned to the lineup after being sidelined by a knee injury. Claytor, who has signed with East Carolina, played at the start of the season in the Mary Garber Classic, but spent most of the season in rehab and didn't rejoin the team until early February. In her absence, the Phoenix continued to roll.

"It's a testament of how well the other seven ladies played without her," said Love. "We were a very good team without Dominique. But we became much better when she came back. Having her on the floor is good for our transition game. When she rebounds we can automatically push (the pace). At the other end, we put her at the top of our 1-3-1 (defense). With her length and athleticism, it gives people a lot of problems."

In the title game, Claytor came off the bench to provide an added spark. By game's end, she had eight points, five assists and seven steals.

Considering that Prep goes only eight-deep on its roster, it's somewhat surprising that this team was able to play at such a high-energy level for the length of a long season. The up-tempo, relentless style is a Phoenix trademark.

"That's just what we do," Love explained. "That's how our practices are geared. Everything we do is pretty much going to be full-court and it's going to be fast. That's the expectation and the kids learn to play that way. With our rotations, we got it down to where we know who needs to sub and when and where. That's the style that we're accustomed to playing."



Photo by Craig T. Greenlee
Daivien Williamson of Prep attempts to get a clean shot against the Voyager Academy interior defense.

Loss

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marish experience shooting the basketball. For the game, Gould's crew went 18-of-74 from the field and 17-of-32 from the free-throw line. Although the Phoenix forced 29 Voyager turnovers, it wasn't nearly enough to compensate for missing 56 shot attempts.

"Voyager Academy was better than us today - period," said Gould, whose team finished its season at 22-8. "Overall, I didn't think our guards played up to par. If you don't hit shots, I don't care who you are, you are not going to win championships. And if you don't take care of the small things, like hitting free throws, then what do you expect?"

A prime figure in Prep's downfall was 6-11 center Jay Huff, who has reportedly signed with Virginia. Huff, voted the championship game MVP, single-handedly changed the flow of the game with 14 points, 14 rebounds and 10

blocked shots.

There was a first-quarter sequence involving Huff which proved to be a bad omen for Gould's squad. Midway through the quarter, Prep's Zaire Williams, a 6-7 power forward, grabbed three offensive rebounds in a row and Huff made clean blocks of all three of Williams' put-back attempts.

Williams, the only Prep player to score in double figures, delivered a game-high 20 points and grabbed a team-high 8 rebounds. Huff's early blocks seemed to set a tone for the rest of the game. The lanes became a "no-go zone" and the Phoenix couldn't find the rim (24.3 percent from the field). Williams, in the meantime, didn't have his usual shooting proficiency (5-of-17 for 29.4 percent).

"Jay Huff is a skilled player and he's special," said Gould. "I don't know how many blocks he had. If you ask me, he probably had 40, that's the way it looked. We can't point fingers at anybody. The referees told us they were going

to let us play and I'm OK with that because we like to be physical."

As dominant as Huff was, he got ample assistance. Collin Faucette scored 19 points on 7-of-9 field goal shooting, which included three 3-pointers. Chance Greene followed up with 13 points, 7 rebounds and 5 assists and China Jones contributed 11 points and 9 boards.

Voyager (32-4) took the lead with 3:47 left in the first quarter on a Nelson White free throw. From that point on, the Vikings kept the Phoenix at a distance.

Prep narrowed the margin to 37-31 on a pair of Williams' foul shots with 3:32 to go in the third quarter, but could get no closer.

"When we cut it (deficit) to six, we forced three turnovers in a row and missed three lay-ups," said Gould. "You can't put that on the big boy because he was trailing (on those plays). We made a couple of runs, but then we had some bone-headed lapses. When you're playing a

good team like Voyager that's been together for four years, they're going to carve you up."

Even though Prep has lost back-to-back state finals, the future is far from bleak. A core group of nine players return, which should bode well for next season. Given recent history, Gould expects his team to come back hungrier than ever to make amends for falling short of their goal to win it all. He sees no need to rely on mantras and witty sayings to fuel the competitive fires of his returning players.

"There is nothing that I should have to say," Gould said. "When they show up in my gym next year for pre-season workouts, or whenever, they know the beast is going to come out. We are living witnesses that if you don't take care of the little things, you're going to be sitting in second place. Voyager Academy beat us at what we like to do best. So, we've got to go back to the drawing board."

QEA

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Forest Trail, which is located in Kernersville, was led by lefty point guard Deshawn Patterson who finished with 25 points, mostly on dazzling drives and tear-drop shots.

It was Senior Night for several folks on the QEA roster, who were honored and applauded at halftime. For those soon-to-be departing student-athletes, which include Corprew and Ndiaye, it marked the final time in their high school careers that they would play in front of the home fans in the Pharaohs gym.

"Tonight was really about the kids," said coach Isaac Pitts of QEA, whose team finished the regular season with a 26-4 record. "The seniors got most of the (playing) minutes and

had some fun in the process."

The Pharaohs led by eight points in midway through the second quarter. The game, however, quickly turned into a runaway when Corprew scored on double-clutch drives, pull-up jumpers and a thunderous dunk. By the end of the first half, QEA's margin had ballooned to 58-34.

"This was a good game, and we had a lot of fun, too," said Ndiaye. "The season has gone well for us. We've been playing great."

Corprew was pleased with his team's performance in its regular-season finale. By the end of this month, he's expected to announce where he will play college basketball. Corprew has attracted heavy interest in recent months from high-profile programs such as Kansas,

Texas A&M, UCLA and Louisville.

"I felt like we did an excellent job on Senior Night," he said. "We wanted to come out, have some fun and end the (regular) season right."

Now that the regular season is history, QEA turns its attention to getting ready for the big stage in high school basketball. The Pharaohs are part of an elite 12-team field for the Grind Session National Championship, which will be played next week (March 24-27) in Lawrence, Kan.

The GSNC has the makings of becoming a marquee event because of the talent level. Team rosters are loaded with some of the nation's elite-level high school basketball players. Quite a few are rated in the Top 100.

QEA is no stranger to this level of competition.

Close to half of the opposing teams on the Pharaohs' schedule played on the Grind Session tour that had stops in 17 cities across the U.S. plus Canada. In Grind Session match-ups, QEA posted a 7-3 record.

"We're about halfway through our preparations," said Pitts. "We've seen everybody (in the field), so we know what to expect. At this time of the season, it's not about running up and down the court. That's why we've been doing some maintenance stuff such as strengthening the bodies and studying a lot of film of our opponents. The major focus is making sure that our guys are mentally ready to play."

Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Pape Ndiaye puts up a shot after grabbing an offensive rebound.

