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Basketball enthusiasts flock to Yosemite Spring Fling

Special to the Sierra Star

Future looks bright
for Yosemite players



Submitted photos

Local Mountain Area youth basketball players placed well at this month's Yosemite Spring Fling Invitational Tournament.



Yosemite youth basketball players scramble for position against an opposing team during the Yosemite Spring Fling.

Earlier this month an unusual number of girls' basketball players were in town.

The reason? Nearly 400 of the state's best AAU travel basketball players came together to compete in the fourth annual Yosemite Spring Fling Invitational Tournament. It was hosted by the Yosemite Youth Basketball Association and held at Yosemite High School and Oak Creek Intermediate.

The Yosemite Badgers entered five teams in four age divisions in this year's tourney. They placed first in the 11-and-younger division and second in the 13-and-younger, 15-and-younger and 17-and-younger age groups.

This was Yosemite's best ever overall performance. Yosemite's teams scored impressive victories over perennial powerhouse basketball teams from Ventura and Oakland.

The three-day tournament has become one of the most popular AAU girls' basketball tournaments in central California.

Jeff Nichols, head coach for Yosemite's 15 and younger team, was excited about the success of the tournament and the growth of the youth basketball program. He was quick to thank all of the volunteers and sponsors, who helped make the weekend tourney possible:

"I can't thank our community enough for its generous support and financial contributions. Our tournament has become so popular that many teams now plan to attend our tournament a year in advance.

"The coaches and parents couldn't praise us enough for the great time everyone has had during their stay in Oakhurst."

The Badgers 11-U team went undefeated during their four-game schedule and soundly defeated teams from Fresno, Ventura, Merced and Bakersfield.

After the championship game, Badger Coach Mac Blate selected Syndee Fipps as the Badgers' MVP and recognized Lacey Smith for her toughness and exceptional play.

Blate also praised Amber Bushman, Devin Grant, Vanessa Mudrick, Erin

Navarro, Emily Solomon and Kaitlin Turner for their efforts.

Blate said that he was very impressed with his team as it came from behind to beat Merced and added:

"The Merced coach was equally impressed with our play and personally congratulated each of our players after the game."

In addition to coaching the Badgers 11-U team, Blate also coached the Badgers' newly-formed 10-and-younger team.

To give the young players some experience, they played up in the 11-and-younger division and often scored in double digits.

Considering this was their first experience in tournament play, this feat was quite an accomplishment. Navarro was selected as Yosemite's MVP and received lots of cheers from teammates Jade Bain, Joanna Barney, Brandi Bushman, Taylor Jenson, Tara Nunley, Pia Peredia, Lauren Reist and Rebecca Schaal.

After defeating Corcoran and Exeter in pool play, the Badger 13-U team advanced to the championship round, to face off against the Merced All-Stars.

Badger Coaches Aaron Nichols and Dustin Westfall selected Navarro as the Badgers' MVP after she led the Badgers in scoring. She had 16 points during the championship game against Merced and sank four baskets from behind the three-point line.

Teammates Jenay Herring, Cassandra Slayton, Courtney Nichols and Nakayla Noonkester rounded out the rest of the Badger scoring leaders. Defensive honors went to Marissa Schaal, Deena Brosi, Crystal Potter, Ashlee Bullard, Krista

Kenyon, Jasmine Singh and Krisina Becker.

The Badgers 15-U team finished second in pool play after they had defeated the Merced All-Stars, 46-44, during the final championship game on Sunday, Nichols said:

“Our team had a lot of fun playing in front of our home crowd and did a great job of setting the tempo and pace of our games.”

The MVP honors went to Crystal Lachawicz, who made four three-point baskets in the championship game and led the Badgers in scoring with 18 points. Runners-up were Ashley Nichols, Patricia O’Neill, Michelle Lalev, Kristin Slayton and Anna Hetherington. Tournament Director and Coach Nichols praised his team, including Samantha Norberg and Jenay Herring, who played up in the 15-U division.

He said, “We have a lot of talented girls playing in our basketball program today, at all levels, and I feel extremely fortunate to be a part of their success.”

The 17-U Badgers were narrowly defeated, 64-61, in the final game — double overtime — of the tournament.

It was only fitting that this was the championship game, between the Yosemite Badgers and the Ventura Galaxy.

“The game lived up to expectations and was absolutely the most exciting game of the tournament,” said Badger Coach, Karras Blate.

Although the Badgers fell behind early, they battled back from a 15-point deficit to tie the game one a three-point basket by Ashley Stearns at the buzzer, to send the contest into overtime.

During the first three-minute overtime, Badger Katie Menton assisted teammates Terah Sonderland, Sonya Eggleston, Emily Richie, Stearns and the Badger MVP, Dori Jenkins, as the Lady Badgers again tied the score and forced the game into a second overtime.

Then, with seconds ticking down, Stearns just missed another three-pointer from half court that would have sent the game into its third overtime.

Club President Rick Slayton said after the game: “Although we lost the game, I couldn’t be prouder of our girls for their hard play and great sportsmanship. “I thought Karras Blate did a super job of coaching her teammates from the bench as she and all the other Yosemite senior basketball players did not play in order to let the underclassmen showcase their talents. It was also great fun to see Yosemite freshmen, Whitney Williamson and Lauren Rolf compete at the varsity level.

“The future looks bright for Yosemite as our girls proved that they are able to compete against some of the very best teams in the state.

“We very nearly beat the Ventura Galaxy team that included some of the best All-Star basketball players from southern California high schools.”

The Yosemite Youth Basketball Association is celebrating its fifth year and sponsors five AAU girls travel teams from age 10 through high school. In addition, a new boys’ tournament is planned to be held in Oakhurst later this year.

More information is available about teams and sponsorship opportunities — by calling Yosemite Youth Basketball Association Club President Rick Slayton: (559) 683-5105, or Assistant Club Director Jeff Nichols: (559) 259-7366.

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