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Photos by Robbie Robertson

The Leake Academy girls basketball team celebrates after winning their 6th Overall Title earlier this month.

Leake Academy claims 6th Overall Title

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
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The Leake Academy Rebelettes basketball program's success is no accident. They have always put the work in.

The Rebelettes have a feeder program that starts teaching the girls to play basketball when they are in elementary school. The team practices year-around. They play tournaments over the holidays. They attend summer camps and play a lot of summer games. All of that combined was a strong desire to succeed pays off.

For them, it's a way of life.

With the 2020-2021 team winning the Mid-South Association of Independent Schools Class 4A state championship and the overall state championship, the school now boasts 21 state championships and six overall state tournament championships in their school history. They have won 33 North/South state championships. That the Rebelettes are going to win their district and district tournament each

year is a forgone conclusion. No one seems to know how many they have won.

Winning the overall state championship doesn't happen every year. The last time the Rebelettes hoisted the overall banner in their gym was in 2009.

Leake Academy played for the overall championship twice in the last four years, losing to Lamar School in 2019 and Kirk Academy in 2018. They won it this year, defeating Hartfield Academy 39-36 in the Lady Hawks' gym.

"This is such a special year," Hatch said. "It is such a hard thing to do. We had gotten to the championship game twice before in the last four years and came up short.

"It is really a hard thing to do. You are playing bigger schools and you are playing them all together, back-to-back. There isn't a lot of preparation time. You really have to rely on the practice and things you have done all year. I told the girls there is no trick, no magic. We are going to show up and do what we



Leake Academy's Miriam Prince kisses the championship trophy after winning the Overall Title.

have done all year.

And that's what we did."

The Rebelettes finished 37-2. They avenged their two losses, beating Pillow Academy in the North state tournament and Jackson Prep in the first game of the overall state.

"Winning the state is always our goal," Hatch said earlier in the season. "But this year, we have had our eye on

the gold ball. This year, we have everything we need to win the overall. There will be a disappointment if we don't."

In the end, no Leake Academy follower was disappointed. The Rebelettes had to win three games against top opponents to win the state title. They opened with a 70-48 victory over Simpson Academy. They then had to battle

past tournament host Hillcrest Christian 52-49 to make it to the finals. Then the Rebelettes took on Hartfield. The Lady Hawks outsized the Rebelettes but Leake Academy brought its "A" game as they won 82-45. The Rebelettes led 42-17 at the half.

The overall state tournament is usually played at Mississippi College. But because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was moved to Hartfield Academy.

Leake Academy drew a first-round bye. They defeated Jackson Prep 72-60 in the second round. They came back and defeated Madison-Ridgeland Academy 44-30 in the semifinals. Then came the rematch with Hartfield.

Leake Academy knew Hartfield well. The Lady Hawks were a good team and the Rebelettes knew going in they would be making adjustments.

The Lady Hawks took extra measures to guard Miriam Prince, the Rebelettes' leading scorer. Prince scored 21 points in the state champi-

onship game but the Lady Hawks held her to seven points.

"They guarded Prince," Hatch said. "She did the intangibles like guarding well, handling the ball and distributing it well. But they were all over her."

Senior Emmi Harkins stepped up and scored 24 points to lead the Rebelettes in scoring. Harkins sank a free throw with 22 seconds left and Leake Academy led 37-36. Then Morgan Freeny sank two free throws to put the Rebelettes up by three and they held on for the victory.

"We did what we had to do at every moment, whether it was make a free throw, get a rebound or get to the rim and score," Hatch said. "Just getting the stop, protecting the basketball and hitting those free throws was an incredible series of events. Harkins really took over. When we needed a basket, she got it."



Senior Mabry Mayfield (#23) leads the team off the bench to celebrate the Overall Title victory.

Seniors help get the job done for Leake Academy

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
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The seniors on this year's Leake Academy girls basketball team have accomplished something not every class gets to do.

The 2020-2021 Rebelettes are the Mid-South Association of Independent Schools Overall State Tournament champions in girls basketball. This is the sixth overall championship in the history of the school.

"To have that Overall State championship banner hanging in the gym and to know I helped earn it is awesome," said senior Mabry Mayfield. "It is an incredible feeling to be part of this tradition at Leake Academy. Basketball is such a huge part of our lives. I have worked at this since I was little. And to be able to say we did it after all the hard work we put in, means so much."

Mayfield is one of five seniors on this year's team that finished 37-2. Emmi Harkins is the other senior starter. Other senior members were McKinley Allen,

Alli Grace Perry and Laura Katherine Clair.

"When you go to Leake Academy, when you get to the third grade, you start learning to play basketball," Mayfield said. "I started playing for Coach Amanda Hatch in the

seventh grade. This senior group is a really special group. There was a lot of determination to get this."

Last season, after playing and losing in the overall state finals the two previous years, the flu bug hit on the wrong week. The Rebelettes were eliminated from the playoffs and for the first time in years, they didn't win state or participate in the overall state. Emmi Harkins said the seniors were determined to make it back to the overall state finals one more time, and to bring home the gold ball.

"Last year, things didn't go the way we wanted it to," Harkins said. "We had something to prove for sure and it being my senior year, I wanted to go out with a bang. I knew we had to work hard every night to get to the finals and we did. We got it done."

Head coach Amanda Hatch wrapped up her seventh season as head coach of the Rebelettes. While at Leake Academy as a player, she was on an overall state championship team. Now she is one of a few people who as won the overall as a player and a coach.

"This senior group is a really special group," Hatch said. "Their determination to win this championship was just incredible. They showed up every day, ready to practice. Never a complaint. It was

always, 'Let's get this done. Let's get better.' It is a way of life.

"The seniors on the court and the ones on the bench all had roles. One subbed in some during the game. I had two, they didn't play much but they wanted to be part of the team. They practiced and they were ready. There were times we had people out and I called their number. They were ready to play," Hatch said.

"Really, I didn't have to do a lot of coaching in practice. The seniors took care of things. They set the bar and everybody kind of followed. A lot of times, you have seniors who are good examples. But this year's group set good examples and they were vocal. They were ready to speak out and that's what makes a good team. This was a super special group."

Graduation is coming up. These seniors will soon be part of the Rebelette alumni.

"I can remember saying I can't wait to graduate," Mayfield said. "Now I have 20 days left. I want to thank my coach, Leake Academy, our fanbase that always came and supported us no matter where we played; my parents who have taken me everywhere I needed to be. And, I thank God for this school and this team."



Photos by Robbie Robertson

Senior Emmi Harkins prepares for a free throw attempt in the Overall Title game.



Senior Laura Katherine Clair signals for the ball in the Overall Title game.



Photos by Chris Todd

The Choctaw Central Lady Warriors pose for pictures after the MHSAA Class 4A State Basketball Championship on Thursday, March 4, 2021, at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.

Choctaw Central wraps up successful season in finals

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
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The Choctaw Central Lady Warriors wrapped up another outstanding season that saw them finish 25-4 and as the runner up in the Class 4A girls state tournament.

The Lady Warriors went undefeated in the Region 4-4A and then won the region tournament. They went 4-1 in the state tournament and won their first three tournament games at home, defeating Ripley 56-40, South Pontotoc 68-32 and Tishomingo County 73-50.

That win was big for a couple of reasons. Tishomingo County had defeated the Lady Warriors 47-44 earlier in the season. And for most of the season, several polls had them ranked as the top girls team in Mississippi.

That win put the Lady

Warriors in the final four in Jackson at the Mississippi Coliseum. In the semifinals, Choctaw Central defeated Pass Christian 72-49 to advance to the finals where they played Pontotoc for the Class 4A state championship.

There, the Lady Warriors' shooting went cold. They couldn't buy a shot in the third quarter as they were outscored 17-4 and trailed 36-26 heading into the fourth quarter.

The Lady Warriors battled back and pulled to within two points. But Pontotoc held on to win the game 55-52.

"We accomplished all of our goals but one," said Coach Bill Smith. "We didn't shoot well in the championship game. But overall, we finished third in the Max Preps rankings because of our strength of schedule. Our losses were to a state champi-

on and two state semi-finalists. And we came back and beat Tishomingo County in the third round of the play-offs. Overall, I thought we had a good season."

Smith wrapped up his ninth season at Choctaw Central.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians hard last summer. While the Lady Warriors usually have a busy summer schedule with games and practice, they were able to get together until after school started.

"We did have practices then, as much as we could," said senior Lyleonia Johnson. "I remember we took it one game at a time because of the COVID. We didn't know if we were going to play the next game or would it be canceled. This year's team was close."



Choctaw Central fans cheer for the Lady Warriors at the MHSAA Class 4A State Basketball Championship on Thursday, March 4, 2021, at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.

Lady Warriors overcome obstacles throughout season

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
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When the Choctaw Central seniors look back at their final year as Lady Warrior basketball players, they will think about the 25 games they won.

They will remember going undefeated during the regular season in Region 4-4A competition and then winning the district tournament. They will remember their march through the state playoffs to the Class 4A finals. In the state championship game, they will remember being outscored 17-4 in the third quarter but then battling back to pull within three points with seconds left. And they will remember the sting of that 55-52 loss to Pontotoc.

Still, the seniors were happy to just have a season. The 2020-2021 basketball season was an unusual year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were no summer practices. Teams could be quarantined and would have to forfeit games if players tested positive.

"It was an unusual season with the COVID," said Lyleonia Johnson. "We didn't get to practice during the summer and I was afraid we would be out of shape in the early part of the season. It showed. We usually do a lot of running."

Johnson talked about what the Lady Warriors basketball means to the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and how she and her teammates wanted to do well for their people.

"There is a lot of tradition involved," Johnson said. "We are representing the tribe. Everybody knows we are going to be competitive every year. Our goal is to win the state championship. So, we get a lot of support from the tribe."

Senior Meloney Thames, who was the district MVP and played in the Mississippi-Alabama all-star game, said she was proud of the season.

"It is really a blessing that we had a season and were able to play for the state championship because of the COVID," Thames said in interview after the state championship game. "We were quarantined a couple of weeks before we started the season. We weren't able to practice like we normally did. For a short season, I am proud of it. I was really



Choctaw Central's Carly Keats (21) drives against Pontotoc at the MHSAA Class 4A State Basketball Championship on Thursday, March 4, 2021, at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.

proud of my girls."

Sarah Williams said it was an honor to be a Lady Warrior.

"When I tried out my freshman year, I couldn't dribble well," Williams said. "My skills weren't where they needed to be.

"I didn't think I was going to make it but I made junior varsity my freshman year. I was happy and

learned to play. I played AAU ball. That coach and Bill Smith really helped me."

COVID-19 proved to be a tough obstacle, Williams said.

"At first, I was bummed," Williams said. "We didn't play as many summer games like we usually do. We weren't able to practice or have a summer league and that

threw us off. We had to get into shape quick because the season was going to start. We had new girls who moved up. But we kept pushing and got ready to play."

Other seniors on the team were Laliana Crosby and Shantashia John.

Williams summed it up when asked if looking back, did every-

thing seem to go by so fast?

"Yes. Now we are going our separate ways and that is sad," Williams said. "But it has been a great experience. I will always be a Lady Warrior fan — those are my girls. It was an honor to be playing here."



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Lady Rockets looking for return trip to Jackson

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
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When Jason Broom looks back at his first season as head coach of the Neshoba Central Lady Rockets, he hopes it's the start of more good things to come.

The Lady Rockets finished the season with a 22-6 record. After an ice storm delayed the tournament for several days at the start, teams had to play three games in five days the next week to get back on schedule.

When the Class 5A state tournament started, the Lady Rockets took a 59-25 win over Grenada. Neshoba Central went on to defeat Vicksburg 73-66 and Cleveland 52-48.

That victory put them in the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson for the Final Four. But then they dropped a 65-52 to Laurel. The Golden Tornadoes went on to win the state championship.

"Anytime you have a good group of seniors, you hate for them that we didn't get that fourth win and advance to the finals," Broom said. "But this can be the building of a foundation. Maybe one day they will look back and be proud of what they were a part of starting.

"We have three starters coming back. We have good young talent coming back. And down through the

seventh grade, we have talented young players coming up in our program."

That includes junior Hama'ya Fielder who led the team in scoring with an 18.3 average.

"We are looking for long-term longevity," Broom said. "Not that anything was broken. Coach Fred Morris' team won the state championship in 2017 and went back to Jackson the next season. We want to continue to compete on that level."

Broom said a lot of things have to happen right for a team to make it to the state finals. It can go either way.

"There are plenty of good coaches and their teams who got to Jackson and lost. They swore they would be back. And then it doesn't pan out," Broom said. "And other teams make it back and win.

"Take Laurel. They made it to the final four and got beat last year. They made it back and won the state championship this year. They knew how to handle their business."

Broom said the Lady Rockets have plenty to be proud of.

"Making it to Jackson is a big deal," Broom said. "Playing in the Coliseum is different. I felt like we played well against Laurel. They made plays. But our kids should walk away feeling good about our season."



Photos by Chris Todd

Neshoba Central's Veronica Williams (23) shoots against Laurel at the MHSAA State Basketball Tournament semifinals on Tuesday, March 2, 2021, at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.



Neshoba Central head coach Jason Broom applauds the Lady Rockets defensive effort at the MHSAA State Basketball Tournament semifinals on Tuesday, March 2, 2021, at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.



Neshoba Central head coach Jason Broom talks to the Lady Rockets during a time out at the MHSAA State Basketball Tournament semifinals on Tuesday, March 2, 2021, at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.

Broom: Neshoba Central seniors are a special group

By **STEVE SWOGETINSKY**
steve@neshobademocrat.com

Coach Jason Broom said the strong leadership of his senior players led to Neshoba Central's success this past season.

The Lady Rockets finished with a 22-6 record and made it to Jackson where they dropped a 65-52 decision to Laurel in the semifinals of the Class 5A girls state basketball tournament.

That was the final game as Lady Rockets for starters Shante' Beaulieu and Jeleisya Jim, and reserve players

Onnahali Williams, Elleigh Willis, Bailey Willis, Sanaa Merrell and Mahli Mitch.

"They were a group that complimented each other well and brought different strengths to the table," Coach Broom said. "Jeleisya Jim on many nights set the tone for us defensively. She ran the point guard position.

"She had a bad ankle sprain at Vicksburg and had to be carried off the floor. She was hobbled but she came back and played."

Broom said Beaulieu was the glue that held everything together.

"She was a quiet player who did her job," he said. "Onnahali and Elleigh were the first players off the bench. A big part of our game was having starter-quality players coming off the bench and getting minutes. Sanaa Merrell was the spirit of the team, working hard every day. You would see the other girls cheer when they had success."

Broom said they will be missed after graduation.

"They were a solid group of players," Broom said. "I hope they will be able to look back in a couple of years

and see that success was built on what they established, even prior to their senior year. This has been a successful program under coach Morris and Byrd. The 2017 team won the state championship."

The Lady Rockets didn't have a normal summer schedule of workouts and games because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Broom is hoping it will be different this summer.

"Right now, I am not sure what the colleges are going to do," Broom said. "But I hope summer will be back to normal. Hopefully, the high schools

will be able to get together,

"We have been through a season with COVID-19 and know the health risks and what precautions to take. Hopefully, we can play in high school gyms and maybe we will be able to play on some college campuses."

Broom is looking forward to next season

"We had a good year," Broom said. "Now let's tweak some things and get a little bit better. We will have experience on our side when we open next year."

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Tornadoes teams improve as season progresses

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
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The Philadelphia Lady Tornadoes earned their biggest win of the season when they defeated Newton High School in the semifinals of the Region 6-2A basketball tournament.

“That was fun,” said first year Lady Tornadoes coach Danielle Spurlock. “Newton is always the team to beat and we lost to them twice during the season. Then we beat them in the district tournament which was a huge accomplishment for my girls.”

Philadelphia entered the tournament as the No. 5-seeded team and had to beat Scott Central in an elimination game before they got a chance to play Newton.

“My girls really worked hard to get to the championship game,” Spurlock said. “They played hard and found a way to beat Newton.”

“That put us in the championship game,” Spurlock said. “We lost to Union, a team that we beat twice during the regular season. They ended up beating us. But the Newton win gave us that boost and confidence to make it as far as they did.”

The Lady Tornadoes entered the Class 2A playoffs for the first time in two seasons. They defeated Wesson 44-34 and then lost 61-40 to Bay Springs. They ended the season with a 9-10 record.

“After placing last in district last season and not making it to the playoffs, we felt like we had something to prove,” senior Emma Taylor said. “We were better than that. If we applied ourselves and pushed ourselves, we could do it.”

“We were in a hole when we went into the district tournament. We were fifth seed again but Mrs. Spurlock continued to support us and encourage us. She told us she believed in us

and all we had to do was believe in ourselves and we would do well,” Taylor said.

With several senior starters from last year lost to graduation, Spurlock said she knew she was taking over during a rebuilding year.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lady Tornadoes were able to hold practices starting in July.

“We practiced pretty faithfully,” Spurlock said. “We couldn’t do after school practice until Oct. 15 but we did in-school practice.”

“I had them in the fall because we don’t play slow-pitch softball anymore. I stressed fundamentals, doing the simple things right. I kept telling them basketball is not rocket science. We had to learn the fundamentals and basics. If we did that, I knew we could win some ball games.”

Freshman Zharia Leflore stepped up and became the team’s leading scorer. She averaged 20 points per game but had a couple of nights when she scored 30 points.

“I would say we were under developed at the start,” Spurlock said. “The players before them had been pretty good and these girls didn’t have a tremendous amount of playing time. That helps you develop. They started a little under developed but they worked.”

Spurlock is in her third year with the Philadelphia schools. She coached junior high all three years. She was an assistant varsity coach last year and took the varsity head coach job this year.”

Tornadoes

The Philadelphia boys made it to the second round of the playoffs. The Tornadoes defeated Loyd Star 73-45 but then lost to St. Patrick 60-43 in the second round. Philadelphia finished with a 10-11 record.



Philadelphia's Zykileous Moore goes for a loose ball against East Webster earlier in the season.



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*From the
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Philadelphia seniors were ready when it was their turn

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
steve@neshobademocrat.com

Seniors Emma Taylor, Markasia Dupree and Jaenasha Clemons all started playing Philadelphia Lady Tornado basketball in the seventh grade.

Before this season, only Taylor had been a starter. But all three seniors started this season and helped lead the Lady Tornados to a big upset victory over Newton in the second round of the Region 6-2A tournament and into the second round of the playoffs.

“We have watched each other grow as people as well as players,” Taylor said. “The improvement that we have made has been amazing.”

Dupree detailed her progression.

“A lot of things changed and we had to step up this year,” Dupree said. “In our ninth and 10th grade years, it was easy because we had the older players ahead of us. My junior year, we had a new coach, Nia Luckett, our top player, got hurt and it was different.

“This year, Mrs. Danielle Spurlock was our coach. She stressed fundamentals and we improved as the season went along.”

Dupree said the highlight was beating Newton.

“We had never beaten Newton before, and it was a great accomplishment,” Dupree said. “That night, I felt we could win the championship.”

Taylor agreed with Dupree’s feelings about the Newton win.

“For the seniors, it was a big deal,” Taylor said. “We had never beaten Newton and they are our rival in basketball.”

Making it to the playoffs was also a big deal.

“I had never played in a playoff game,” Taylor said. “The last time we made it, I was an under classman and didn’t get to play. It was a lot of fun to play in the game.”

Seniors for the Philadelphia boys were J.J. Hudson, Trezekius Bingham and Trea Hunter.



Members of the Philadelphia High School girls basketball team are, front left to right, Niasia Moore, Pashae Roberson, Jaiden Burnside, Zharia Leflore, Markasia Dupree, Hailey Donald, Ariel Burnside (back) Shaytrece Mingo, Kacey Nickey, Jaenasha Clemons, Emma Taylor, Jada Gray, Ambriah Parker, Zariyah Jackson, and Nisha McCarty.



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Yellowjackets teams make it to the playoffs

By STEVE SWOGETINSKY
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Both Union High School basketball teams put together outstanding seasons.

The Lady Yellowjackets finished with a 25-7 record under fourth year head coach Matt Wilbanks. They won the Region 6-2A tournament championship.

They then went on to win three Class 2A tournament games in five days as they defeated Bogue Chitto 46-43, Puckett 61-31 and West Lincoln 35-32. West Lincoln eliminated the Lady Yellowjackets the year before and that evened the score.

Union advanced the Class 2A final four in at Jackson in the Mississippi Coliseum where they dropped a 44-29 decision to defending state champion Calhoun City.

The Lady Yellowjacket have improved record wise in each of Wilbanks' four seasons. In his first year, they went 15-13. They went 17-

15 his second season and 23-8 the third year. This year, they finished 25-7 and won the district.

The Lady Yellowjackets will lose three seniors this season: Keshona Smoot, Taniqua Hunter and Trinity Lambert.

Union boys

The Union High School Yellowjackets wrapped up an outstanding season in which they finished 19-8 under head coach John Darnell.

The Yellowjackets finished second in the district tournament, losing to Newton High. They beat Wesson 53-35 in the first round of the playoffs but then lost a 54-48 decision at Bay Springs.

The Yellowjackets will lose six seniors and four starters to graduation: Jamarcus Jones, Dylan Harrison, E.J. Campbell, Bryce Young, Robert Craft and Troy Campbell.

Next season, Union will be moving up to Class 3A.



Members of the Union High School girls basketball team are, front row left to right: Sydney Coward, Kataya Bishop, Keirra Russell, Kamyia Russell, Camenisha Holiday, Aamagine Taylor. Back row from left: Georgia Cooper, Maddie Cook, Taniqua Hunter, Trinity Lambert, Ramaiyah McDonald, manager, Keshona Smoot, Madison Buckley, Morgan Shaw and Anna Shaw.



Union's Kenyon Clay makes a pass against Newton earlier in the season.



Members of the Choctaw Central girls basketball team are, front row left to right, Yuri Crosby, Kylie Williamson, Mattison Bell, Lyleonia Johnson, Shantashia John, Tyra Billy, (back) Meloney Thames, LaLiana Crosby, Sara Williams, Jocelyn Bell, Kyla Farmer, Carly Keats and Neera Bell.



Members of the Neshoba Central girls basketball team are, front row left to right, Rodezah Smith, Hama'ya Fielder, Onnahili Williams, Sanaa Merrell, Heaven Dixon, Jalesiya Jim, Shante Beaulieu (Back) Veronica Williams, Bailey Willis, Elleigh Willis, Mataeya Dixon, Shaylynn Hunter, Katelin Williams, Aaliyah Tahawah, Mahli Mitch*, Denise Denson and Nalani Thompson.



Members of the Leake Academy girls basketball team are, front row left to right, Morgan Freeny, Natalie Vaughn, manager Parker Woods, Grace Maxie and McKinley Peoples, (middle) Ramzy Beth Johnston, McKinley Allen, Emmi Harkins, Mabry Mayfield, Laura Katherine Clair, Alli Grace Perry, Laney Turner and Parks Chandler, (back) manager Caitlin McDonald, Miriam Prince, Kaleigh Wooten, Maggie Stevens, Kayte Jones, Emeri Warren, Allen Kaye Wilcox and manager Tori Pigg.



Two Teams - One Tribe Congratulations on a Great Season

