

# SPORTS

Photo courtesy of Ryan Bergeron  
Kobey Dallager plays some defense during the second half of the Gators' state quarterfinal victory over the Deer River Warriors. Dallager led the Gators in points with 25.



## Hitting the Target: Gators advance to state semifinals

### Play Hayfield on April 7 at Target Center

Ryan Bergeron  
ryanb@wiktel.com

The Gators had not yet led when the clock ticked under four minutes in its Class A State Boys Basketball Tournament quarterfinal game versus the sixth-ranked Deer River Warriors. Then, Gator senior Kasen Swenson lined up a three-pointer from the corner and shot it. The ball went in the hoop, giving the

team, really, really athletic, gave us some fits," Coach Christian said. "They went five around nobody and really tried to spread us out. And I thought our guys did okay with it, but we won that one with heart."

The Gators trailed by as many as 10 points in that first half. A Ty Morrison three-pointer for the Warriors put the Gators in a 13-23 deficit with 7:50 remaining in the first half.

half, we didn't shoot the ball very well. We were kind of missing some bunnies underneath there," Benke said. "And we just need to clean up our game, and that's what we did in the second half."

A pair of Dallager layups within less than 40 seconds of each other tied the game at 39-39 with 12:46 remaining—the first time the game was tied since 0-0.

Then the teams exchanged

and coaches walked out of Pequot Lakes High School to be greeted by a cheering Gator Nation.

Offensively, the Gators shot 50 percent from the floor. Dallager led the team with 25 points, followed by Benke with 15 and Blawat with 11.

Morrison led the Warriors with 23 points. Wakonabo posted a double-double performance with 21 points and 10 rebounds.

Asked how they were feeling following the win, Swenson and Benke expressed various emotions.

"I can't even say it, put it into words. It's amazing. The guys came out and worked and we had faith in everyone again. And it just clicked," Swenson said. "When we got down right away... we went through some perseverance and we just kept going. And it's awesome. I love it."

Benke expressed being relieved.

"We were down by I think it's six at halftime and... we have lots of experience and we just overhauled this team (in the second half)," Benke said. "And I'm glad to be moving on."

In the Class A State Boys Basketball Tournament semifinals, the Gators will play the Section 1A Champion Hayfield Vikings at noon on Wednesday, April 7 from the Target Center in Minneapolis, home of the Minnesota Timberwolves.

Benke and Swenson look forward to the opportunity to



Photo courtesy of Ryan Bergeron  
Aven Augustson is all smiles while celebrating the Gators' state quarterfinal victory in Pequot Lakes on March 31.



Photo courtesy of Ryan Bergeron  
Gator students do a cheer during a timeout at the Gators' 58-52 state quarterfinal victory over the Deer Warriors on March 31 in Pequot Lakes.

Gators a 52-49 lead with 3:32 remaining.

The Gators would not squander this lead and, soon after this shot, the history of Gator Basketball would change. The Gators defeated the Section 7A Champion Warriors 58-52 in Pequot Lakes on March 31 to win the program's first state tournament game and advance to the state semifinals for the first time in program history.

"It felt good. It was my first (outside) shot that went down. I just felt like it boosted everyone else's confidence," Swenson said about the three-point shot. "When you're struggling and you make one, it just brings something within you that keeps you pushing and makes you go harder. And so we locked down on 'D' and it went from there."

Leading the program for the past 18 years, Gator Head Coach Kent Christian said he was exhausted after his team's historic victory and explained how his team won thanks to something that went beyond the x's and o's.

"I thought our guys really played with a lot of heart. Deer River, man, they're a solid

Then the Gators made a move with a 9-0 run. During this run, Adam Benke made a layup while getting fouled and made the ensuing free throw. Kobey Dallager capped the run with a layup, drawing the Gators to within one, at 22-23, with exactly six minutes left before halftime. The Gators trailed 29-35 at the break.

In the second half, the Gators limited the Warriors to 17 points. For the game, the Gators held the Warriors to 39 percent shooting. Asked about his team's defense in the second half, Coach Christian again pointed to heart.

"We said coming into this that Deer River, they'll shoot themselves into a game (and) shoot themselves out of the game. If they're hitting, they're going to be really tough," Coach Christian said. "To start off, they were hitting. We clamped down on defense, but they were really good off the bounce. And I thought a few times we were slow on the help (defense), but all in all a good job."

Senior Adam Benke talked about the mindset going into that second half.

"Our mindset (was) just play a better half. Our first

some three-pointers. The Warriors' Sam Rahier made a three-pointer and 12 seconds later Benke answered with a three-pointer—the team's first made three-pointer of the game—one tying the game at 42-42 with 12:13 remaining.

Just over 20 seconds later, the Warriors' Mikhail Wakonabo hit a three-pointer and just more than a minute later Benke answered again with a three-pointer, tying the game at 45-45 with 10:47 left.

A Morrison free throw and three-pointer put the Gators in a 45-49 deficit with 8:29 remaining. Then, the Gators went on an 11-0 game-clinching run.

During this spurt, Swenson tied the game on a layup before making that three-pointer one minute and 45 seconds later—the shot that gave the Gators the lead for good. Dallager later made a layup and Zac Blawat a couple free throws to cap the run and give the Gators a 56-49 lead with 1:23 to play.

After the final buzzer sounded, the Gator players celebrated in another huddle and came to the other side of the court to celebrate closer to the fans. The Gators shared a longer moment of celebration with the fans when the players



Photo courtesy of Ryan Bergeron  
Gator fans rose to their feet and cheered following the Gators' 58-52 state quarterfinal victory over the Deer River Warriors on March 31 in Pequot Lakes.

step onto that floor—one Coach Christian referred to as the "big gym" following his team's section championship win.

Benke is "stoked" for the chance.

"That's awesome... I want to say this day would never come, but it is," Benke said. "It's coming and I'm excited."

It's another dream come true in a season that delivered

one earlier—a section championship.

"It's amazing," Swenson said about playing at Target Center. "It's going to be a dream of mine. I love it."

The Gators planned to do a shootaround on April 1, practice on April 2, take the weekend off for Easter holiday, and then return to practice that week to prepare for the semifinal game. Coach Christian is excited for his team's opportunity to play at Target Center.

"Hey, I get to go shopping at Target, I told them," Christian

crowd. And I'm just real proud for the guys."

As the Gators head to the state semifinals, the message from Swenson to his teammates is to not be satisfied just yet.

"It's open from here on out," Swenson said. "Everyone's beatable, and we just need to keep pushing and go hard. And I think we can do good things here."

The Gators have reached a couple targets—a section championship and a visit to the Target Center—but look to

said. "I won't show you the moves that I showed them in the locker room when I go shopping."

With the win, the Gator program assured itself of a top four finish in the state for the first time. What does that accomplishment mean?

"It means we have a lot of good players," Coach Christian said. "Gator Nation was outstanding tonight; what a

keep reaching more targets while down in the Twin Cities, knowing they have the support behind them to do it.

"Just keep your head and keep your nerves under control," Benke said. "We're all here for you and Gator Nation is."

## ERIKA HOWELL SIGNS LETTER OF INTENT TO PLAY SOFTBALL AT MAYVILLE STATE



Submitted Photo  
Gator softball senior Erika Howell and Gator Head Softball Coach Kent Christian pose for a photo together during an event held in the evening on March 30 at the GMR School, one where Howell signed her letter of intent to play softball as a Comet at Mayville State University.

## SIXTH GRADE GATOR BOYS BASKETBALL TEAM

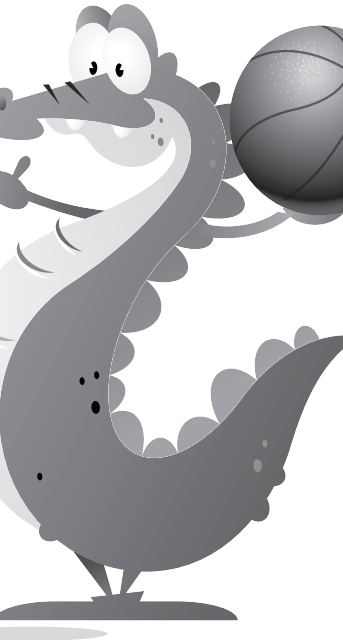


Photo courtesy of Erin Przekwas  
This year's sixth grade Gator Boys' Basketball team posed as a group. They are (L-R): Front: Levi Olson, Eli Olafson, Nathan Gust, and Will Foss; Back: Payton Gust, Levi Wahl, Alec Beito, Bennett Bertilrud, Austin Przekwas, and Brock Sikorski; Not Pictured: Coaches Derrick Gust and Brent Olson.

## GATOR LITTLE DRIBBLERS PROGRAM



Submitted Photo  
The Gator Little Dribblers program ran every Sunday for five weeks starting on February 28. Gator varsity girls basketball players, Curt and Kelly Christian, and Amanda Kjos coached the Gator Little Dribblers participants. Pictured are Gator Head Boys Basketball Coach Kent Christian and Gator Little Dribblers participants.

Submitted Photo  
A total of 55 first to third grade Badger and Greenbush-Middle River students registered for Little Dribblers this year. Every participant received a basketball compliments of Border Bank and the Gator Boys and Girls Basketball programs.

