

BOYS BASKETBALL PLAYOFFS



Esko's Cuinn Berger shoots a three-pointer in front of a packed Eskomos student section during Thursday's Section 7AA final against Pequot Lakes in Duluth. Photos by Dave Harwig / Pine Knot Sports

State slips from Esko's grasp

-Kerry Rodd
sports@PineKnotNews.com

A slow second half for the Esko boys basketball team allowed Pequot Lakes just enough time to pick up a come-from-behind win in the Section 7AA boys championship game last Thursday night. The Patriots overcame a 5-point halftime deficit to win 58-50 and advance to the Minnesota State High School Class AA basketball tournament.

"I thought in the first half we moved the ball well, but our shots didn't fall," said Esko coach Derek Anderson. "We defended well, but we missed some layups and we just seemed passive."

The Patriots came out with a game plan of slowing down the athletic Eskomos by playing a 1-2-2 zone defense, which allowed the Patriots to dictate the pace of the game.

"At halftime we talked about coming out and being more aggressive, but that isn't how it turned out," Anderson said. "At one point we got up by nine points, but then we'd make a bad pass, or let them grab an offensive rebound and not box out on the boards."

Those offensive rebounds resulted in putback baskets and seemed to energize the Patriots, who picked up the pace as they overcame the 23-18 halftime deficit.

As with Barnum — the other Carlton County team in a section final — the day went a little sideways before the game even started. A bomb threat meant Esko



The Esko boys basketball team poses for a photo following their 58-50 Section 7AA final loss to Pequot Lakes Thursday at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

students had to be evacuated for the last three hours of the school day, while bus problems delayed the Bombers' trip to play Foley the next day.

Esko was led by Koi Perich and Cuinn Berger with 12 points each. Nick Swanson scored nine and Dalton Spindler added 5 points. Mason Perich finished with 4 points, Connor Lahti and Sam Haugen scored three each and Carter Zezulka finished with two.

The Eskomos will lose seven seniors to graduation this season: Mason Perich, Brett Lillo, Nick Swanson, Chad Hart, Keone Anderson, Conner Lahti and Carter Hermann.

"Our goal was to get to a state tournament from the start of the season," Anderson said. "While

we didn't reach our goal, which was disappointing, I have nothing but good things to say about these players and especially our seven seniors. They showed the younger kids how much work and effort is needed to get to this level, so hopefully the younger players will realize what kind of work they need to put in."

Esko, which had beaten Pequot Lakes by 13 points on Feb. 8, finished the season at 25-4 and as the Section 7AA runner-up.

Esko's Makoi Perich shoots over Pequot Lakes' Sam Rysavy during Thursday's Section 7AA final at UMD.



Memorial spurs a host of memories

At Cloquet coach Rol Bromberg's recent visitation at Nelson Funeral Care, I was astounded by the preeminent collection of athletic and family photos on display. Undefeated football teams, track regional relay champs, Brom and his wife at Twins games, hugs with grandkids, birthdays, his own high school and college awards, the dedication of Bromberg Field. One particular picture brought a twinkle to my eye: a photo of Bromberg and Dickie Eklund out on the Athletic Park football field, dated 1979.

Dickie was one of the more well-known dignitaries in Cloquet. He was not elected, a part of the clergy, or awarded medals for heroism. His friendly face just followed Cloquet high school sports and Minnesota team's unwaveringly. From my observations, Dickie was likely intellectually disabled, but it didn't matter. He and Ray Poirer were special people with special needs, and were highly revered as friends by many Cloquet citizens and athletes. Both are dead now, and I decided on some personal reflections on these two as well as revisiting thoughts from those who were even closer to Ray and Dick.

Dickie's connection to Cloquet football and sports went back to the 1950s, pre-Bromberg coaching days. Chic Oist was the Cloquet coach at the time. Chic's daughter Linda Erickson, who works at the Pine Knot newspaper office, said that her dad "just loved Dickie."

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KORBY'S CONNECTIONS



Steve Korby



Rol Bromberg and Dick Eklund had a special relationship through sports. Contributed photo

Barnum falls short in section final

Dwight Cadwell
sports@PineKnotNews.com

The Barnum boys basketball season came to an end Friday night as a state-ranked Nevis team defeated the Bombers 67-37 in the section 5A finals in Foley.

Barnum — the top seed out of the eastern half of the subsection — met up with the western half's top seed in front of a large and very loud crowd in Foley. The defending section 5A champion Tigers were seeking their fourth trip to the state tournament while Barnum was seeking its third state appearance, and first since 2007.

Things got off to a rocky start. On the way to Foley, the bus had mechanical issues and had to pull over in Sturgeon Lake and await another bus, pushing the Bombers arrival at the Foley gym 45 minutes behind schedule.

But the Bombers shook off any nerves and played well in the first half, battling with the much taller and more physical Nevis squad. Matt Berry scored 7 points in the first half, finding openings in the Nevis



Barnum boys basketball coach Rich Newman patrols the Bombers' sideline during the 5A semifinal game this month. *Dave Harwig / Pine Knot News*

2-3 zone. He was successful finding some easy layups to help Barnum take the lead twice: one at 3-2 and another at 21-17, following a Hayden Charboneau 3-pointer.

The Tigers battled back before the half ended with John Paul Benson doing damage inside and Eddie Kramer hitting a 3-pointer before the buzzer. Nevis led



Bombers players and coaches pose with the plaque for their second-place finish in this year's Section 5A boys basketball tournament. Barnum lost to Nevis 67-37 Friday in Foley. *Dwight Cadwell / Pine Knot News*

30-25 at the break.

The defending section champions came out in the second half and switched up their defense, playing a half-court trap. That made it hard on the Bombers to run and set up their offense.

At the same time, the Tigers continued to pound the ball inside to Benson and Kramer added three more long-range bombs as Nevis outscored Barnum

22-7 to start the second half.

Trailing, the Bombers continued to fight but couldn't get their offense on track. Nevis would get to the free throw line 30 times for the game — 17 times in the second half — and make 21 of those free throws. Those shots extended the lead and the contest ended with a 30-point Tiger victory.

"I am very proud of this

group of seniors," Bombers head coach Richard Newman said, "They came to the gym every day ready to work and they are all good kids."

Top scorers for the Tigers were Benson with 16 points, followed by Kramer with 14 and Ty Warrington with 12 points in the win; 10 of his 12 points came from the charity stripe.

Berry finished with 9 points to lead Barnum

while Charboneau ended with six. Joe Peterson, Evan Gustafson each ended with 5 points, while Willie Richardson and Layne Wickstrom scored three. JJ Stevens, Carlos Beckstrand and Max Moors had 2 points each.

The Bombers' season came to an end with an overall record of 21-9 on the year.

Coaches announce changes

Kerry Rodd
sports@PineKnotNews.com

The basketball season ended with no local teams moving on to state, but the movement of local coaches has just begun.

At Moose Lake/Willow River, six-year head coach Wes Cummins has decided to step down, citing time commitments and family time as his main reasons.

“I have a daughter who will be playing in middle school basketball next

year and a son who will be playing elementary school basketball,” Cummins said. “I will be coaching boys third-grade basketball next year and U9 boys baseball this summer, so I guess you could say I am stepping down in age and responsibility.”

Cummins took his team to the state tournament a year ago. This season, the Rebels rode a rollercoaster season of Covid-related illness and injuries, but still finished 17-9 on the

season.

Over at South Ridge, Phil Pliska announced on Facebook last week that he will not be back to coach the Panthers boys basketball team next season.

In his post he said, “For the record, this was not my decision but I respect the administration’s decision as they move forward in their search for a new head coach.”

The Panthers wrapped up their season with a record of 14-11.

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NORDIC SKIING

Cloquet's Ripp rips it up at nationals

Jana Peterson
sports@PineKnotNews.com

Cloquet's Aidan Ripp and his teammates from Paul Smith's College skied their way to a national championship earlier this month. It's been a good season for the Class of 2019 Cloquet High School grad, who also competed in the 2022 U.S. Olympic Trials in Nordic combined in December and a Continental Cup race in China before that.

Ripp said they weren't sure how things would go in the 2022 U.S. Collegiate Ski and Snowboard National Championships, since Covid canceled most of the big competitions the previous year.

"We knew it was in the ballpark," he said.

Indeed it was.

Over the course of the week-long competition, Ripp took first place in two out of three Nordic ski races he competed in individually and another first in a mixed-team relay race at the USCSA national meet in Lake Placid, New York.

Cloquet trained

Ripp — who grew up skiing and ski jumping at Cloquet's Pine Valley — gives his university Nordic sports program a lot of credit for his breakout performance at nationals. "We have a good community of people here," he said, also praising the coach. "It's not easy, but it's way more fun to train and be more productive."

Paul Smith's College is located on 14,000 acres in New York's Adirondack State Park. Ripp said if he wants to go skiing, he just has to walk a quarter-mile to get his skis, then walk across the road and he's on a trail. The school is building its Nordic ski programs with great success, including Ripp's specialty — Nordic combined — and biathlon. Ripp is one of two Nordic combined athletes at the school so far.

Being there allows him to do more than train, however. He is a very good student academically, and enjoys other athletic activities in the off season. Last September, he participated in a 90-mile canoe race. "You want to keep it fresh, keep yourself enjoying it," he said. "And that built strength in a different way."

His dorm — and many of the campus buildings — sits right next to a lake. The views are spectacular, and the lake is fun.

"I just really enjoy training here. In the summer I run, roller ski, canoe, sail. I can ski on campus. I've realized a lot of training is because you enjoy it. It's so nice



Cloquet grad Aidan Ripp dominated the Nordic ski competition at the recent U.S. Collegiate Ski and Snowboard National Championships in Lake Placid, New York. Ripp won the overall individual award, below, and his team from Paul Smith's College in up-state New York won the overall team award. *Photos courtesy Paul Smith's College*

This weekend

Cloquet's Aidan Ripp will wrap up his competitive season this weekend, competing in Nordic combined at an international Continental Cup event at Lake Placid. Although the weather was "ridiculously warm" in the area last week and weekend, a cold spell meant they could make enough snow for the competition. He will jump Friday and Saturday mornings, with a 10K ski race Friday and 15K on Saturday. Online go to fis-ski.com and choose "Nordic combined" to find out more.

to be here and just get up and go train, not have to drive an hour."

At nationals

Ripp started the USCSA national championship event with a commanding individual performance in the 7.5K Nordic ski race on March 8. He finished the freestyle cross country ski race in 18:26.90, almost 50 seconds ahead of the second-place finisher in a race with 52 of the top collegiate Nordic skiers.

Three of the six skiers from PSC were in the top five and Paul Smith's men's team won the 7.5K freestyle with 10 points, followed by St. Olaf with 19 and Western Colorado University in third with 33 points.

Ripp also placed first in the 15K classic race on March 11, a mass start event. Ripp finished in 43:37.40, just over 22 seconds ahead of second place, leading his team to another first-place finish

in that race as well. Ripp also placed third in the classic sprint race on March 9, while the PSC team finished second.

The week concluded with the mixed team relay with three men and three women skiing laps of 1.3 kilometers in the freestyle technique. The Bobcat women started the effort in second place, opening a one-minute advantage over the next team.

The Bobcat men took over the race from there and skied away from the field, starting first with Gus Whitcomb, who established an early lead. He touched off to Logan Jensen, who kept his team at the head of the pack before turning it over to Ripp. Despite his previous successes and level of exertion, according to a PSC press release, Ripp "blew the race open on his first of three legs and continued to ski away from second-place University of Wyoming."



The performances were made more noteworthy given the radical changes in weather conditions that saw the athletes compete in rain, warm temperatures, wind and blinding snowfall. "Symbolic of the week, we literally stormed our way to our first-ever overall national championship," remarked an elated Matt Dougherty, PSC Nordic ski coach.

The Paul Smith's College men's team went on to win the combined team award, and Ripp won the men's individual combined award.

More than 510 competitors competed for national collegiate titles in alpine, Nordic, snowboard and freeski events at the USCSA event, including 100 Nordic athletes.



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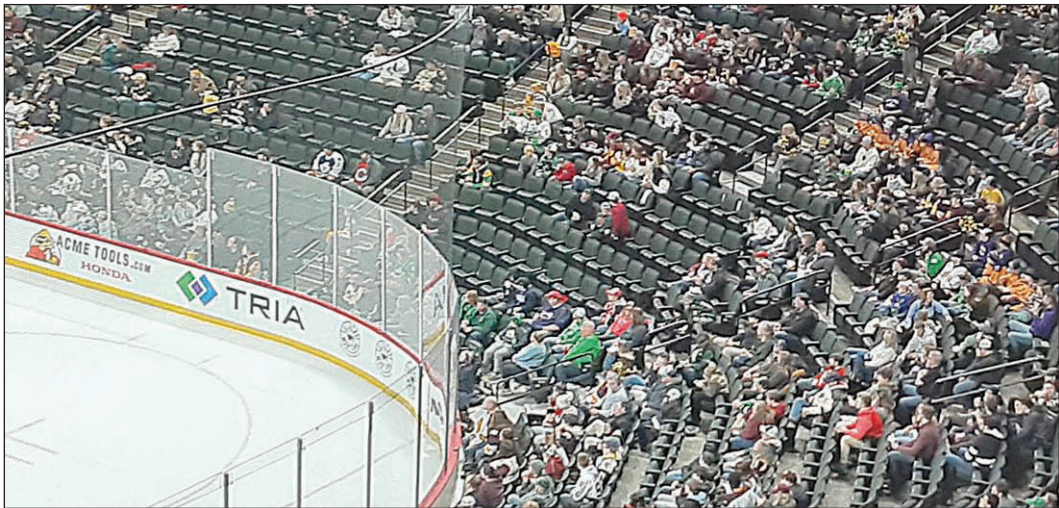
COLLEGE HOCKEY

BENDER GETS SOME LOCAL LOVE



Area fans of University of Minnesota Duluth hockey player Koby Bender, who is from Cloquet and is a former Lumberjack, came out in force in St. Paul last weekend as the Bulldogs won the National Collegiate Hockey Conference Frozen Faceoff tournament at Xcel Energy Center, taking two games Friday and Saturday. Bender scored a hat trick the week before to propel UMD into the “final four” weekend and the conference tournament win. The team began NCAA tournament play Thursday afternoon in Colorado. Right: Bender flicked pucks and gave fist bumps through the glass Saturday as a group of kids in Lumberjacks jerseys, and a large Lumberjacks banner, clamored for his attention. Bender acknowledges the support in warmups Saturday from Sam Midge, Ethan Kvitek, Brennan Gerard, and Nikolas Lehto. Top: Posing with the banner Saturday night are Cole Luense, Brennan Gerard, Easton Halverson, Kenna Gerard, Stacey Gerard, Josh Gerard, and Jamie Halverson. They were an inconspicuous group in a corner of the arena Saturday.

Photos by Mike Creger; Bender photo courtesy of Jamie Halverson.



WILDERNESS

Alaska proves fruitful

Pine Knot News

The Minnesota Wilderness completed a 5-1 road trip to Alaska Saturday night with a 3-1 win against Kenai River. The Wilderness (30-21-1) swept the three-game series against the Brown Bears (13-36-5). It also marked the end of a nine-game road trip, of which the Wilderness won seven. Barrett Hall led the way Saturday night, with a goal and an assist, while Matt Smith shined again in net, making 29 saves.

The road success propelled the Wilderness to take sole possession of third place in the NAHL's Midwest Division. It also sets up a showdown scheduled for this weekend in Cloquet with the team right behind them in fourth, the Janesville Jets. The teams square off Friday and Saturday at Northwoods Credit Union Arena in Cloquet.

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BARNEY SIGNS WITH CENTRAL LAKES

Cloquet High School basketball standout Conner Barney signs his commitment letter to Central Lakes College basketball March 11 with coach Jim Russell, his brother Jesus Delapaz, right, and Lumberjacks teammate Owen Defoe-Hayes looking on.

Dave Harwig / Pine Knot News



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