

Defending State Champions seek repeat

By John Martin
Staff Writer

Harrah fans will have to wait until the Panther Classic to get a glimpse of the defending state champion Harrah Lady Panthers on their home court.

Coach Jeff Mahoney and his 2017-18 Ladies have mixed emotions and memories of last year's Panther Classic where they lost to Choctaw in the finals. But...they purged the memory of their lone poor performance of the season and literally romped to the State Class 4A title without losing another game to finish 27-1 and a Gold Ball.

The Lady Panthers will open the new season with the target of Defending State Champs clearly stamped on their backs every time they take the court, starting with always tough 5A power Shawnee on the Lady Wolves' court on Nov. 28.

Little Axe, St. Mary's and Bethel have joined Harrah, Jones, Tecumseh and McLoud to form the new North Canadian River Conference and the Lady Panthers journey to Little Axe and Tecumseh for games that will serve as warm-ups for the Panther Classic, which again could feature defending state champions Harrah and Choctaw fighting it out for the championship.

LOGAN'S THE ONE

Mahoney reflected on last year's champs and other teams he has fielded in his illustrious career as usually having one "surprise" or unexpected contribution. He pegged Logan Collyer from last year's team.

"She had very little varsity experience coming into her senior season, but I sensed a fire, a drive and desire to contribute to the team. And the rest is history. She was an integral part of our championship and was rewarded with a college scholarship," he recalled.

And who can forget the clutch three-pointer that she drained midway through the final quarter that officially nailed

down the championship win over Fort Gibson?

No big deal, she said, after the game, but we all knew better.

Who will be this year's surprise?

Well, it won't be Katie King, the poised and talented sophomore who came off the bench early in the contest last season and sometimes never returned to the bench. An excellent ball handler and distributor, good shooter and a bear on defense, she is definitely poised for greatness and certainly will not be a surprise.

It could be Katie Klimkowski, super-athletic freshman who could slide into King's role or even more. Mahoney modestly admitted that Klimkowski would "possibly" get a varsity suit.

Or 6-1 junior Kambri Ingraham, whose talent is unquestioned but knee injuries have derailed her first two seasons. She is hopeful to return by January, maybe even in time for the Panther Classic.

Or seniors Payge Wilson and Piper King both of whom had strong performances during summer play and gained valuable experience in JV games and saw considerable action with the varsity.

And who knows, the Lady Panthers might even get a move-in or a transfer player that could enhance their drive to a repeat title.

The bitter memories of losing to Newcastle in the state finals in 2016 have nearly been replaced with 2017 Gold Bold Mania, so there will be no Flight of the Phoenix, no crashing and burning this year as the Lady Panthers will be primed and ready for a repeat run against the Beasts of the East in 2018.

ALI, "E" LEAD THE WAY

ORU- commit Erika Ankney was named to the State Tournament All-Star team and will join Ali Brzozowski as senior leaders of next year's squad. Brzozowski finished strong last season against some of the elite

"Big" girls in the state and continued that domination during the Summer League play.

And the sky's the limit for the talented King, who broke the hearts of players, coaches and fans of Locust Grove, Ada and Fort Gibson in the State Tournament last year and had an excellent role model in Maddison Collyer in pulling the trigger of the Panther Express this year.

Piper King will have her deadly three-point shot ready to go and Mahoney is excited about the prospect of playing Ingraham, when she is cleared to go, combining with Brzozowski for a deadly low post combo. Payge Wilson is also anxious to prove that not only is she just as pretty as her mom, Shelli (Baker) Wilson, but she can excel on BOTH ends of the court. (Shelli was an outstanding guard in the 6 on 6 game).

Plus, JV standouts Linzy Inglehart, Kenzie Lasker, Kayla Willard, Tionna Cooper,

Kaitlyn Wynn, Alyssa Hart and Ashley King all have State Championship medals for this year and will be dedicated to getting another.



Ali Brzozowski goes up for two in last year's Class 4A State Championship game.

PHOTO BY JASON TURNER



Erika Ankney drives toward the hoop in last year's state final. PHOTO BY JASON TURNER