



sportsblitz

High School

March 6

Track

Jacksboro Meet (Bowie)

Valley View Meet (Nocona)

Baseball

5 p.m., Bellevue vs Petrolia

March 6-8

Softball

Graham Tournament

(Bowie)

Nocona Tournament

Baseball

Walker Stallcup Tournament

(Bowie)

Nocona Tournament

Saint Jo Tournament

March 7

Softball

1 p.m., Saint Jo vs Chico

March 10-11

Golf

Weatherford Golf

Tournament (Bowie)

March 10

Soccer

5 p.m., Bowie @Mineral

Wells

Baseball

6 p.m., Bowie vs Petrolia

11 a.m., Bellevue @Era

Softball

11 a.m., Saint Jo vs

Muenster



Dallas
Mavericks

March 7

vs Memphis 6:30 p.m.

March 9

vs Phoenix 2:30 p.m.



Dallas
Stars

March 6

vs Calgary 7 p.m.

March 8

@Edmonton 9 p.m.

inbrief

Local athletes
help win titles

Two former Nocona Lady Indians had good days in college basketball during the weekend as well.

Junior Avere Klein-hans came off the bench and led her team with 26 points to help Texas Women's University secure its third straight Lone Star Conference regular season title on Saturday with a win against UT Tyler 71-61.

Freshman Skyler Smith played a small role in helping East Texas Baptist University beat Hardin-Simmons University 78-67 to win the American Southwest Conference Tournament Championship.

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News photo by Jordan Neal

The Nocona Lady Indians beat San Saba 54-37 on Feb. 27 to win the 2A Division I state championship, only the second in program history.

Lady Indians win state title

By JORDAN NEAL

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They did it.

The Nocona Lady Indians knocked at the door of a state championship one more time and won the 2A Division I state title on Feb. 27 at the Alamodome.

After losing at the buzzer in the title game the previous year, the Lady Indians instead dominated for three quarters against San Saba to easily win 54-37.

Nocona had been

through the ringer its previous two games playing teams with strong post players, beating Muenster in the regional final in double overtime and upsetting second ranked Panhandle in the state semifinal.

Just surviving those games had the Lady Indians as prepared as they could be, having stared elimination in the face in both of those games before overcoming.

Nocona was favored coming into the game,

ranked eighth overall in 2A in the last regular season poll while San Saba was ranked 14th.

The Lady Dillos had not been challenged all playoff run, but had only faced one team ranked in the top 25 in the state on their way to the championship game.

Most importantly for the Lady Indians, San Saba did not feature any players with real size or post up games like they had struggled to contain. The Lady Dillos instead

relied on their full-court pressure defense to create turnovers and create scoring opportunities in transition while relying on a trio of senior players with a lot of experience.

If Nocona could keep the game played at the pace it wanted and not let San Saba's pressure let the game get too chaotic, it would favor the Lady Indians.

The first quarter was ugly offensively for both teams. Nocona saw guard Meg Meekins continu-

ously drive into the paint, but her finishes were just slightly off. Besides her getting fed on a cut by Reagan Phipps for a basket and Meekins finding Jasmine Olivares open for a layup, the Lady Indians offense was not able to make the open shots they were getting.

On the other side, Nocona's defense was man-to-man, with the emphasis on bringing a double-team when the ball entered the lane on

See NOCONA 4B

Longhorn run comes to an end

By JORDAN NEAL

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The Forestburg Longhorns' season came to an end on Feb. 27 in the regional semifinal against state-ranked Huckabay.

The Indians won 47-42 against the Longhorns, ending Forestburg's dream season.

The Longhorns came into the game as underdogs. Huckabay was ranked sixth in the state in 1A according to the state poll. Forestburg was coming off two dominant wins against Avery and Newcastle, already making it the most successful playoff run since 1965 for the Longhorn boy's basketball program.

Forestburg had nothing to lose while being underdogs. The team had one hiccup heading into the game.

Leading scorer Jesus Sanchez turned his ankle during the previous playoff game. Even with a week of recovery, Sanchez was not at 100%, but he did not let that stop him from playing in the game even if he was limited.

The first quarter saw Huckabay make three 3-pointers and led 12-10 as the Longhorns tried to contain the Indians on the perimeter.

Forestburg then raced out to an 22-14 lead midway through the second quarter, scoring inside and defending well against a Huckabay team looking to score around the basket against the



Photo by Cindy Roller

Jesus Sanchez drives to the basket and tries to finish through tough contests.

Longhorns zone defense. The Indians were able to score twice in transition and once in the mid-range and upped its pressure defense to halfcourt that through Forestburg off.

The Longhorns led 22-20 at halftime.

Forestburg was able to build a 32-24 lead heading into the final minute of the third quarter, scoring at the basket on dump offs, drives and of-

fensive rebounds. Huckabay scored twice off of turnovers to cut the lead to 32-28 heading into the fourth quarter.

The Longhorns jumped up in the opening minute of the final period building a lead to 37-28. The next three minutes saw the Indians take back the lead 38-37, going on a 10-0 run as they upped their defensive intensity that forced turnovers and

made key shots around the rim.

Huckabay, now playing with the lead, was able to keep up this momentum while Forestburg just could not make the plays to get back into the game.

The Indians won 46-41.

Kyler Willett and Josiah Wadsworth led the team with 12 points each while Jesse Wadworth

scored 10 points.

It was a disappointing end for a Forestburg team that was on a magical run. The team not only won the program's first district title since 2008, but advanced past the area round of the playoffs for the first time since 1965.

This team had been building towards this season for the past two years. Despite having to adjust to a new coach this year in Cutis Enis, who broke his five-year retirement to come back and coach, the team had a mission from the start to win district and see how far they could go.

While I'm sure some players and coaches will be kicking themselves for not playing their best in the fourth quarter, it shows what type of potential the athletes in this program have when it can hang with a program would have won most of the regions in the state if it did not share one with state-power Perrin-Whitt, who the Indians lost to in the next game.

For Enis, he did not come into the school year expecting to be pulled back into coaching, but the team got him his 500th career victory and memories he won't soon forget.

"I am very proud of the guys for their effort and attention to detail all season," Enis said. "It was truly an honor on my part to coach this team."

Nocona

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either a drive or post up. This left San Saba opting to fire away from 3-point range, with late contests coming from the Lady Indian defenders and the Lady Dillos just not finding any success.

The lack of offense from San Saba meant it was not able to set up its press defense like it wanted besides initially trying to deny Meekins the ball. She used this tactic against the Lady Dillos in the waning seconds, leaving her defender in the dust on the inbounds play and racing up the floor before casually banking in a 3-pointer at the buzzer.

It gave Nocona a 7-5 lead after the first quarter.

San Saba came out in the second quarter more determined to set up a full-court press. The Lady Indians initially tried to aggressively attack it by sending passes over the top, but it did result in one turnover out of bounds and Nocona was still in a rut offensively.

Then Meekins, who was so far out her foot was on the UIL logo, decided to launch a 3-pointer that went through the net to give Nocona back the lead 10-9 midway through the second quarter and the Lady Indians were off.

The next possession, Nocona was passing the ball around and Aubree Kleinhans, catching it on the other side but almost as far out as Meekins, launched a 3-pointer that went in and the Lady Indians were now up 13-9.

San Saba answered with a basket following an offensive rebound to make it 13-11, but then it was all Nocona until halftime.

Meekins made another 3-pointer, this one from the corner she somehow banked in. Phipps made a mid-range shot following a mad scramble for the ball. Meekins then did one of her patented spins in the lane followed by a tough floater.

Nocona led 20-11 at halftime, but it felt like a bigger lead.

San Saba had gone 0-9 from 3-point range in the first half. The Lady Dillos tried to set up their top scorer, Cinzlea Stanton, in the post since she had a few inches on Meekins. Every time she caught the ball a double-team had come which limited her effectiveness to three points.

The second half saw the Lady Indians pick up where they left off. Meekins hit another floater in the lane and deep 3-pointer. Bayler Smith made an open 3-pointer before forcing a turnover on defense.

Nocona was up 30-12 midway through the third quarter and things were looking like the Lady Indians were the better team and was going to continue pulling away.

San Saba then got a push from Stanton until the end of the quarter. She scored 12 points in the next four minutes, including a deep 3-pointer of her own, the first made shot from distance for her team.

This allowed the Lady Dillos to show some life though they were still down double-digits 35-24 heading into the fourth quarter.

San Saba continued that momentum to start the fourth quarter. The team got a 3-pointer to go through from Chassidy

Gonzales. Then a block on defense led to a transition basket from Olivia Sebastian.

The 18-point lead was now down to six points, with the Lady Dillos trailing 35-29 with almost the rest of the fourth quarter to play. It could have gone bad if momentum had stayed on San Saba's side, but instead Nocona had an immediate answer.

Kleinhans knocked in an open corner 3-pointer 30 seconds later to give the Lady Indians some room. The Lady Dillos threw the ball out of bounds on their next possession. Nocona then scored as Meekins cut the basket for another floater.

The Lady Indian defense then made something happen as Kleinhans jumped a passing lane before passing the ball up to Meekins for an uncontested layup.

Nocona was now up 42-29 and San Saba had to take a timeout. A literal minute of game time had seen the Lady Indians go on a 7-0 run, taking all of the momentum the Lady Dillos had been playing with since the middle of the third quarter.

From there, it was a slow march to the end of the game.

San Saba tried to bring its press to force the action and not allow Nocona to passively run the clock. Unfortunately for the Lady Dillos, their players could not stay in front of Meekins, who broke the press by herself several times leading to layups for her teammates and an open 3-pointer for her.

San Saba made one more 3-pointer as a team, but just could not score enough to come back from double-digits while the Lady Indians lead grew and grew.

With 20 seconds left, Meekins dribbled the ball up the court and it was clear the Lady Dillos were not going to pressure her to give up the ball. The realization on all of Nocona's players faces on the court seemed to hit at once. The stoic Meekins spiked the ball in celebration as the Lady Indians rushed on the court in celebration. While the team had shared more frantic and emotional celebrations following wins in the previous week, this one was the sweetest.

Nocona won 54-37.

Meekins led all scorers with 30 points while dishing four assists and getting four steals. Kleinhans had a double-double with 13 points while grabbing a team high 14 rebounds. Both were named to the 2A All-State team in the days that followed.

It was almost fitting all five starters, who had been on the team for the past three years, played the most minutes in the game.

After playing multiple games needing to pull every available post player in the program, the matchups dictated Nocona play with its classic lineup with the most experience.

Meekins, Phipps, Kleinhans and Avery Crutsinger have started for the past three years, with Jolie Rose coming off the bench until this year. It is almost too fitting the starter the team lost last year, Skyler Smith, her younger sister Bayler proved to be one of the key players off the bench, finishing several games including in the state

final game.

The group has been through a lot. This year has been talked about as a revenge tour since last year's loss in the state final was so traumatic. Everyone knows that it happened, but with this year's format change splitting up 2A into two divisions, the revenge could not really take place since the team had to watch Martin's Mill win the state title again in the game played right before.

Instead this year's team was more of a last ride scenario since so many key players were seniors. With all but one player returning, the team knew there was good chance to do it this year, but that one player proved to be tough to replace.

There is a reason Skyler Smith is playing college basketball, helping East Baptist University to a conference title last weekend. The team could not just put Rose in her place and hope to play the same.

"Early on we weren't clicking like we did last year," Spitzer said. "We had to figure out what we had to do to hit our stride. I think they figured it out."

Established roles had to be rethought and redistributed. Examples include Phipps having more of a greenlight from 3-point range as she established herself as a usual constant second scorer on top of her usual role of aggressive perimeter defense. Kleinhans took up the second ball handler role when teams tried to get the ball out of Meekins hands at times. The team had to rebound better overall with Smith being the team's leading rebounder as well.

Spitzer, who is used to playing a small bench like he did in the title game with only seven players, played most of the season bringing three to four players off the bench. He had other options to throw at teams and it most famously paid off in the team's playoff games against Muenster and Panhandle.

With that expanded role meant less playing time for some established players, which at times probably brought them frustration and pushed their egos. The team's motto, "one team, one pulse" was truly tested.

While this team this season is the one that won the games to earn the trophy, this season was the culmination of seven years of steadily building a program ever since Spitzer was hired and was joined by his low-key assistant Clayton Brown.

Every season has brought with it a district title, the last six being undefeated. The first four years were in 3A and the teams were successful, but just could not break through the third round of the playoffs against the likes of Brock and Peaster.

The drop down to 2A was fortunate as Nocona went to another level of dominance even with the team being full of underclassman its first season in the classification.

The first foe was Lipan, the eventual state champs that beat the Lady Indians in the regional final in 2023 and gave Nocona its only loss that season. Last year was redemption, with No-



Aubree Kleinhans scored 13 points and grabbed 14 rebounds as she was named to the all-state tournament team.



Meg Meekins led all scorers with 30 points as she was named the game's most valuable player and to the all-state tournament team.



News photos by Jordan Neal

The Nocona bench cheers on the players on the court as the team starts to pull away.

cona upping its schedule difficulty knowing it had Lipan in the way.

The Lady Indians took care of business to get to state for the first time ever, survived a wild game against Wellington to get to the state final to play a traditional state power in Martin's Mill despite having limited time to get ready. It looked like it was going to go Nocona's way up until the final second. There are few ways to lose a game more painfully, let alone a state championship.

All of that makes this title that much sweeter. While only players on this team get their names etched in school history forever, it doesn't happen without the key players that came before.

"It's unfortunate all of those girls before don't get one of these medals," Spitzer said. "We aren't sitting here if we don't go through all of that. They set the foundation for this program and the culture we implement here. I was texting Skyler Smith and she was saying she wishes she was here and I said you are here. You are a part of this. So many of those girls are still a part of this. They helped us get here."

The seniors go out like every senior player dreams to. Meekins, Phipps, Crutsinger and Kaygan Stone leave with their last game having been a win with the biggest trophy as prize, which is something few seniors get to say.

For Meekins and Phipps, the duo both played all four seasons on varsity and get to boast having the most wins (136) and the program's first state title on a resume that will be hard to match for any class.

"Every little girl in Nocona dreams of this," Phipps said. "From a very young age you are told, expectations in Nocona are high. We hang banners in the elementary gym, hang banners in the middle school gym. It feels different to hang a big whole banner in the high school."

For Meekins, her name gets etched into school history even deeper. Coming into high school on the heels of a player like Averee Kleinhans, who had her own big weekend leading Texas Women's University to a conference

title, Meekins had people excited about her junior high exploits, but no one knew if she could live up to Kleinhans.

Meekins leaves as the second player in school history with more than 3,000 points, second to Kleinhans but first in the single-game scoring record. She has won almost every individual accolade there is for her to win and now has the distinction of leading the program to its first state title.

This year she had to pull her weight even more than she had in her first three years. She especially did when her team needed it the most, scoring 27 points against Muenster, 36 against Panhandle and a flashy 30 points against San Saba. That cements her among the top athletes in Nocona history from now until forever. Of course Meekins, like she always does, only points the credit back to the team.

"It's everything I've ever dreamed of since I was a little kid," Meekins said. "Just all the hard work and dedication from my teammates and coaches, I wouldn't be the player I am today."