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OC VARSITY

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Girls basketball notes: New-look Aliso Niguel flourishes under first-year coach Brad Johnson



Point guard Nicole Referente, left, and forward Catherine Swanson helped lead Aliso Niguel to a 74-53 victory against Mark Keppel at the Matt Denning Nike Hoops Classic at Mater Dei on Saturday, Jan. 4. (Photo by Dan Albano, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Aliso Niguel's girls basketball team is making sure Orange County takes notice of its rising talent and first-year coach.

The No. 4 Wolverines improved to 13-3 on Saturday with a 74-53 victory against Mark Keppel at the Matt Denning Nike Hoops Classic at Mater Dei.

But beyond the numbers, Aliso Niguel showcased its new style of play under Coach Brad Johnson and several of its improved players.

The Wolverines pressured Mark Keppel with a heavy dose of man defense, a twist from their zone tendencies last season. And they played a free-flowing, up-tempo offense that featured drives to the basket with read-based passes to the perimeter for 3-point attempts.

"It's a lot different," Aliso Niguel senior forward Catherine Swanson said of the style. "We love it."

The offense and defense are both signatures of Johnson, a walk-on coach who was hired late in the spring to replace highly-successful coach Lindsey Sundin, who resigned after five seasons and led the Wolverines to four consecutive South Coast League titles.

"Aliso is playing hard and they are well-coached," said Mater Dei coach Kevin Kiernan, whose team plays at Aliso Niguel on Jan. 28. "They all look like they are on the same page."

On defense, a new wrinkle places 6-foot forward Swanson, a UC Irvine-committed forward, guarding the ball. That's the same strategy Mater Dei is using with 6-foot-3 junior forward Brooke Demetre, a Stanford commit.

Aliso Niguel features several new players to watch on offense. Senior Nicole Referente remains at point guard, but the Wolverines have several options despite a knee injury to Sarah Matossian.

Junior guard Kaila Truby, who averaged 4.3 points last season, scored 16 points and added three steals against Mark Keppel. She appears to be the heir apparent at point guard.

Juniors Sara Eyre and Karina Cabrera were the Wolverines' top threats from beyond the 3-point arc Saturday. They both made two 3-pointers and finished with 16 and 8 points, respectively.

Last season, they combined to average 8.1 points per game.

Eyre spent the offseason completing Johnson's "shot challenge" of making 10,000 baskets on her own. The breakdown was 3,000 3-pointers, 3,000 free throws and 4,000 2-point field goals.

"It's 10,000 makes, not just attempts," Johnson said. "It takes a lot of time spent in the gym."

At Mater Dei on Saturday, Johnson also featured 5-foot-11 sophomore Shayla Gillmer off the bench. The active forward had four points, three assists and three rebounds in just over 14 minutes.

"A lot of them have stepped up," Swanson said of her teammates. "We all have our nights. We all have our days and everybody shows up."

The players' improvement has helped Aliso Niguel absorb the loss off Matossian, a standout who Johnson expects to return from her knee injury this season.

"Now that we have a lot more people contributing to the scoreboard, it makes it a lot easier," Referente said.

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