

Playoff-bound Clark team strong on talent

Women's squad reaches postseason for first time since '06

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When members of the Clark College women's basketball team talk about their upswing this season, the explanations are familiar: tenacity, dedication, a shared purpose.

Oh, and one other significant ingredient — talent.

"In the fall, it was inspiring to see how much talent we have," said Tashia DeLacruz, one of only two sophomores on a Clark team that will be in the playoffs for the first time since 2006.

With three games left in the regular season, the Penguins are a solid third in the West Division at 10-3. They will play in the Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges tourna-

ment March 6-9 in Kennewick.

The Clark men have been eliminated from playoff contention.

Three games remain for the Clark women before the NWAACC tournament, including Saturday's 3 p.m. battle with rival Lower Columbia at the O'Connell Center.

It was a four-point loss to the Red Devils in January that helped convince this Clark team it could compete against top-flight foes.

"That was the game we really started to trust and believe in each other," freshman point guard Renee Tzeo said.

Fourth-year head coach Nancy Boone said she liked the ability and attitude of this team from the start of the season. Still, the coach did not know if that would translate into wins.

"I'm surprised in the sense that we're very young," Boone said. "But I'm not surprised in

Clark hoops

Remaining home games

Saturday: Lower Columbia at Clark, women 3 p.m., men 5 p.m.

Wednesday: Tacoma at Clark, women 6 p.m., men 8 p.m.

the sense that they play well together as a team."

With nine freshmen, players' roles evolved as the season unfolded. The result is a versatility that allowed the team to weather some injuries and to win without any one player carrying a big scoring load.

"We knew we had a lot of talent," said Tzeo, a freshman from Reynolds High School in Troutdale who is averaging 13.5 points and 3.75 assists per game. "We've been surprising other

teams, and some fans."

Boone has been preaching the value of each possession. The coach points to lowering turnovers — from more than 30 a game to less than 20 in several recent games — as one example of the learning curve. Still, that number will need to improve for the Penguins to succeed in the postseason.

The Penguins have survived some ineffective offensive games by playing solid defense. They have held three of their last four opponents under 50 points.

"We've definitely evolved into a defensively strong team," DeLacruz said.

Boone stresses that possessions are as valuable on the defensive end as they are on offense. Buying into that philosophy has helped a young team make a statement — and the playoffs.