

PHOTOS: Prep boys basketball: Austin Rivers leads Winter Park into City of Palms semifinals

By ADAM FISHER

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PHOTO BY BRIAN TIETZ, BRIAN TIETZ PHOTOGRAPHY

Winter Park's Austin Rivers (25) shoots for 3 as Dwyer's Terrell Harris (4) covers in the first half of their game at the 38th Annual City of Palms Classic at Bishop Verot High School in Fort Myers on Monday, December 20, 2010. Photo by Brian Tietz

FORT MYERS — Two years ago, Winter Park came to the City of Palms Classic an unknown school from an Orlando suburb led by an unheralded sophomore sharpshooter.

Playing in their third straight City of Palms this week at Bishop Verot, things are much different for the Wildcats this season. Winter Park is a top 10 team, and that sophomore, Austin Rivers, is ranked the top senior in the country by some and has committed to defending national champion Duke.

The Wildcats have been on a three-season hot streak, including a Class 6A championship last year, that players say started in the Bishop Verot gymnasium two years ago.

Winter Park wasn't among the top 10 seeds in the 2008 City of Palms but knocked off three of the top six seeds, all ranked nationally, on its way to third place.

The Wildcats came back last season and finished second.

The fact that Winter Park was hoisting a state title trophy less than three months later, the Wildcats say, is no coincidence.

"It gave us confidence," said Rivers, tabbed the nation's top senior by ESPN, Rivals.com and Scout.com. "After we realized we could play with these guys (at the City of Palms), it showed us we could beat anybody."

"From that first game (in 2008) when we beat (ESPN's preseason No. 1 team) Duncanville (Texas), we've been on a roll. We don't plan on slowing down."

With a 76-64 victory Monday over Palm Beach Gardens-Dwyer, Winter Park has earned its way into the City of Palms semifinals for a third straight season.

The Wildcats' first trip to Bishop Verot also was Rivers' coming out party. He was ranked sixth in the Class of 2011 at the time and committed to Florida, but his value skyrocketed after averaging 30 points a game in the tournament.

Rivers scored 46 points in the third-place game that year, the sixth-highest single game output in the City of Palms' 38-year history. The 6-foot-5 guard earned MVP honors in 2008. Last year, he became the first person to win the award twice when he averaged 29 points a game, including 45 points in the semifinals, helping Winter Park become the first Florida team to play for the tournament championship in more than a decade.

This season, though, Rivers said he won't settle for another MVP plaque. He wants a championship trophy.

"People always look at my scoring, but honestly that doesn't mean anything to me," Rivers said. "At the end of the day, all the MVPs don't mean anything if we don't win the championship."

Rivers is well on his way to a third straight MVP award. In two games he has 70 points, including a 42-point performance Monday against Dwyer.

Since the 2008 tournament, Winter Park is 52-12. After losing in last year's final, the Wildcats won 19 of their next 20 games. The only loss was in the 6A-District 4 final, but the team made up for it by winning its first state title in the school's 83-year history.

Fifth-year coach David Bailey said the City of Palms holds a special meaning to his players. The Wildcats always look forward to the tournament, he said, not only because of the excitement of the prestigious event, but also because the competition gives them momentum for the second half of the season.

"It does give us confidence," Bailey said. "We can use it for wins and losses and say, 'We've played against better teams than we play in the playoffs. We can play with anybody in the state of Florida as long as we're playing together as a team.'"

Winter Park is seeded fourth in this year's City of Palms. To get to their second straight championship game, the Wildcats will have to beat top seed Alpharetta (Ga.)-Milton. The Eagles have three starters committed to Division I colleges and started the season ranked No. 1 by USA Today.

The Wildcats say they're happy to be back in the mix at this year's event and look forward to defending the No. 10 national ranking bestowed upon them by USA Today.

"This is a huge tournament," Wildcats senior and Florida Atlantic recruit Brett Comer said. "Last year we took second, so we wanted to come back here and redeem ourselves. We didn't get the best seed, either, so we have a lot to prove this year."

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