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The McKinleyville girls pose for a picture after winning the Niclai Championship Friday at HSU. Jackie Christensen/The Eureka Reporter

Panthers secure three-peat

by Sean Quincey, 2/16/2007

In the locker room before Friday's Dick Niclai girls basketball championship, McKinleyville head coach Brad Warze sensed that his 6-foot-1 freshman guard Sage Romberg was in for a big game.

How correct he was.

"There was something about her. It was almost electric," Warze said.

Romberg scored nine straight McKinleyville points in a two-minute stretch late in the fourth quarter that burst open an otherwise tight game, and the Panthers defeated South Fork 63-53 to claim their third straight Niclai title.

The Lady Cubs had the size in the post to match up with Romberg, but her athleticism forced South Fork to defend her with guards who were half a foot shorter. Romberg took full advantage and scored 26 points, 15 of which came in the first half, to go along with 16 rebounds and six assists.

Romberg's run was coupled with a four-minute scoreless stretch by South Fork, which was a product of solid McKinleyville defense, timely turnovers and perhaps a tired Cubs squad that used few substitutes.

For the freshman, it was the biggest game of her young career and her performance took place on the biggest stage to this point of the season.

"You could tell in the locker room before we came out that Sage — who is normally very calm, almost subdued — that this game she was going to come out," Warze said.

Lady Cubs head coach Rob Wilkinson said his team, which normally runs a man-to-man defense, played a 2-3 zone because a few of its players were feeling ill in the days leading up to the game. Mack found the holes in the defense and often scored early in the possession whereas South Fork committed many of its 16 turnovers by passing around the

horn to set up the offense.

“Not to make excuses, but several of our girls were sick and we didn’t have the energy to play man. And we left too many people open,” Wilkinson said. “We missed too many free throws and one-footers. And that’s not taking anything away from McKinleyville, they played a great game.”

Romberg made her presence felt early by pulling down seven boards in the first period when the Panthers opened up a 14-6 lead by the 2:52 mark, though South Fork closed to 33-31 by the half.

South Fork center Rochelle Connolly and guard Janay Wilkinson worked an inside-out game beautifully throughout the night, particularly when the Cubs needed points. Connolly scored a team-high 20 points and had 14 rebounds and four assists, three of which set up Wilkinson, who scored 17, including three 3-pointers.

Friday’s game was McKinleyville’s seventh trip to the final round in as many years, and a rematch of the 2005 meeting between these two teams. It was the second time the Panthers and Cubs met this season, with South Fork taking the first game 66-50 on Jan. 30 at home.