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By Dennis Garcia
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RANDLEMAN - For the past two seasons, the Randleman High School girls' varsity basketball team has reached heights it hasn't experienced in quite some time. After years of struggling and enjoying very little on-court success, the Tigers have combined hard work, dedication and the coaching of Brandon Varner to become Piedmont Athletic Conference regular season champions.

Now the state playoffs begin and the Tigers are excited for the opportunity to keep this magical season going after earning the second seed for the upcoming state 2-A East Regional Tournament. Round 1 is scheduled for Tuesday night when the Tigers host No. 31 South Johnston at 6 p.m.

"I'm just so proud of what they have been able to accomplish this year," said Varner, who took a struggling program and turned it around instantly. "They have been able to build on the success from last year. Knowing what we had returning from last year and adding some pieces from a middle school team that was pretty good, we knew if they gelled, it could be something really special and it has been."

The last two years have meant quite a bit of success for the Tigers, who won a total of 20 games in the six years prior to Varner taking over. RHS suffered through a pair of 1-22 seasons as well as a 2-20 campaign for a three-year total of 4-64.

However, with Varner leading the way, Taylor Gantt



Coach Brandon Varner and the Tigers during a PAC 7 game in January.

becoming one of the top all-around players in the area and a number of young players stepping into varsity roles and succeeding, the Tigers went 15-10 last year, a jump of 12 wins from the previous season. RHS had a great deal of success in the Piedmont Athletic Conference as well, finishing 10-2.

This year's numbers have been even more impressive. The Tigers will take a 21-2 record into Tuesday night's game, with the only losses coming to 3-A Southwestern Randolph in

December and to High Point Andrews Saturday in the finals of the PAC Tournament. RHS won the regular-season PAC title with a perfect 12-0 record, including two tight wins over the Red Raiders. In fact, taking the two losses out of the equation, the Tigers have won by less than 10 points only five times the entire season.

"They have nothing to hang their heads about," Varner said about the 51-48 loss to HPA on Saturday. I told them it wasn't a big deal because we get to play next week. We have a chance to do special things. The girls are really invested in what they are doing and they want to keep this going. They really care. There is a lot of fire and hunger to keep this thing going. As a coach, it's very rewarding to see those things."

The Tigers have an exceptional balance of talent dispersed through all four classes. Senior point guard Taylor Gantt has been the heart of the team and her improvement during her high school career is certainly one of the main reasons the Tigers have been able to take the giant leaps the last two seasons. Senior Emma Marlowe has been a key cog for the Tigers as has sophomores Hannah Hinshaw and Veronica Marlowe and freshmen Gracyn Hall and Elizabeth York.



Taylor Gantt during a recent conference game at Randleman.

Gantt is no doubt the leader.

"She has grown so much since her sophomore season and she is such a great teammate, she wants to win. She is so competitive and the other girls feed off her. She knows how to run the team and get the girls in the right position to score. She has become the complete package at the point guard position."

Hall has enjoyed a tremendous freshman campaign. She has the ability to score from inside or outside and she shows no fear at either end of the court.

"She means so much to us," Varner said. "She works hard."

.Everyone has.

"They have all worked so hard to get where they are now," Varner said. "It has to be rewarding for them. You know where it used to be and now it's totally different. It's been a lot of fun."

Now it's on to the state playoffs for the second straight year. Last season, the Tigers earned a first-round playoff win before being eliminated in the second round.

"Now we have a senior guard who has played in the playoffs and we have played 23 games, so there really is no such thing as a freshman. They have been tested all year long and no

way should they be playing like freshmen."

Varner said former RHS coaches Terry Linthicum and Brain Nance, two of the most successful girls coaches in school history, deserve a lot of credit. It is these two who Varner said he has leaned on for advice during his two years at RHS. The success the team has enjoyed this year means home playoff games up until the regional championship contest.

"We have a great community and a great following for Randleman girls basketball and a lot of that is because of these girls," Varner said. "There is so much buzz around the program from what they created. Winning basketball games will do that. They have put Randleman girls basketball back on the map."

That they certainly have.