

## WIAA state girls basketball: Notre Dame wins D2 title

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ASHWAUBENON —The Green Bay Notre Dame girls basketball team might not have always known it, but deep down Sara Rohde knew her girls had it in them.

Sure, they had six losses on their record. Yes, they'd been pushed to the limit in their sectional semifinal against Pulaski, but the proposition of winning a state championship never wavered in the mind of the Tritons' second-year head coach.

As the WIAA Division 2 state tournament wore on, Rohde could sense her team beginning to realize that belief.

With waves of the hometown crowd chanting them on, the Tritons (23-6) fulfilled their destiny on Saturday night at the Resch Center when they downed New Berlin Eisenhower 42-33 to capture the D2 state championship, the program's first since 2001.

"At the beginning of the season, I didn't think it would be possible, but every game it became more and more real," said Notre Dame senior Anika Johnson, who led her team with 11 points and eight rebounds.

"After our conference was over —we didn't take first in our conference —but we were really like, 'Let's go for it every game. It's worth it. If we're going to keep playing, we might as well win.'"

Win was exactly what the Tritons did while also christening the first WIAA state tournament held in Green Bay by being the third area team to capture a state title on Saturday along with Kewaunee and Algoma.

However, Notre Dame had to work for it with the Lions (25-3) limiting Fox River Classic Conference player of the year Allie LeClaire to only five points on 2-of-7 shooting.

Although LeClaire was quiet offensively, she helped facilitate a team-wide effort that helped stake the Tritons to a lead that lasted through the entire first half.

Eisenhower, which ended New London's 68-game winning streak in Friday's semifinals to advance, made its strongest push at the start of the second half with a 7-0 run to take a 24-19 lead.

Rohde called timeout, to which her team responded with a 6-0 run of its own while holding the Lions to only one more field goal the rest of the quarter.

After scoring only two points in the first half, senior Brianna Byrne responded with eight in the second half, including a three-point play at the start of the fourth quarter that gave the Tritons the lead for good.

"I thought we were forcing shots and we weren't getting the ball up inside, which is really what our offense predicated around," said Rohde, whose team outscored Eisenhower 23-9 after the Lions' early 7-0 start to the second half. "We need to get post touches at least and we started doing that. Once the ball went inside, it collapsed down and kicked it out. ... We got some wide open layups off of it and our girls did a great job of responding."

The Tritons weren't exactly sharp from the free-throw line as they went 10-of-17 as a team, but senior Sabrina Rapisarda made four clutch free baskets down the stretch to rebound from a 1-for-7 night from the field and seal the win.

When it was settled, Notre Dame's pressure defense held the 2010 state champions to only 27.7 percent shooting from the field. While it only generated one steal, it helped frustrate a potent Lions offense that entered state shooting 51 percent from the field.

The balance approach resulted in Johnson, a volleyball player by trade, leading the team in scoring for the first time she could remember this season while LeClaire was held under double digits for only the fifth time in 27 games this season.

“It doesn’t really matter —just that we got the state championship is all that matters,” said LeClaire, who rolled her ankle during the D2 state semifinals. “All my teammates stepped up so big and I’m so proud of them. My ankle is fine. I just tried to hit the open man and it worked.”

The Tritons were making their first back-to-back state tournament appearances in program history after falling to eventual state champion, New London, in the semifinals last year.

While there were some questions to answer in their follow-up campaign, especially after a 4-3 start to the season that ushered in Rohde’s instillation of the press defense, the Tritons came through in style.

“During the tournament run I’m guessing they felt that way,” said Rohde about the team’s title aspirations. “Some of our girls always felt we had the ability, especially after we made it last year. I know Anika —I think she knew we could make it there. It’s just a matter of coming together as a team and we really did come together at the right time.”

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