

'Right' on time: Panthers clinch share of Big 5 title

Nick Wilson/The Times Standard

Posted: 02/04/2009 01:31:35 AM PST

ARCATA -- It may not have been as pretty as they wanted it to be, but it all looks all the same in the record books.

The McKinleyville girls' basketball team clinched a share of the Big 5 crown -- the Lady Panthers' fifth consecutive -- with a 52-39 win over cross-river rival Arcata Tuesday night. And with one more league win, either against Eureka or Del Norte, the Panthers will claim the crown outright.

"This is great for our program," said McKinleyville head coach Dustin Dutra. "We didn't want to be the team that broke the streak. We've been looking to continue the good things that (Brad) Warze started here. I saw an inspired effort in the first quarter, but we got a little complacent in the second through the fourth quarters. You just can't come out flat against a team like Arcata."

As the game got under way, it looked as though the Panthers were going to run away with the show, jumping out to a 14 point lead by the end of the first period.

McKinleyville's Sage Romberg commanded the court throughout the contest -- leading the Panthers in scoring with 22 -- and showed her ambidexterity when the left-handed shooter drove to the elbow and stroked a jumper with her right hand. The shot put Mack up 12-2, but the Tigers refused to roll over.

Rebekah Matteri helped bring Arcata back within

striking distance, scoring a game-high 23 points and pulling down 13 rebounds for a double-double. Her defensive effort and offensive productivity allowed Arcata to cut the lead down to one point in the second quarter, but Mack only took the opposition's comeback as a wakeup call.

As the first half neared the end, McKinleyville's Kaila Johnson and Romberg both struck from beyond the arc, and just like that, the Panthers rebuilt a comfortable lead.

Johnson also played a key role in the win, showing total control on the floor, hitting three big treys and finishing with 11 points.

After the break, the Panthers maintained their lead and momentum when Sara Shorey found Romberg wide open as she cut through the lane. Shorey hit Romberg in mid-air, and the star guard converted the alley-oop for one of the dazzling plays of the game.

Romberg struck again in the final seconds of the third quarter as she drove from half court, cut past several defenders, and nailed a six-foot jumper just before the shot clock expired to give her team a 42-29 advantage. From then on, the Panthers cruised to victory.

Though the outcome was not in favor of the home team, Arcata head coach was pleased with his teams effort throughout the game.

"I'm really proud of the girls," said Arcata head coach Dusty Scofield. "They battled back and stayed coachable. McKinleyville did a great job though."

With the win, McKinleyville remained perfect in league play at 6-0 and 15-5 overall, while Arcata slid to 1-4 and 12-11.