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Paint Branch rallies past new rival

Cole's heroics lift still-perfect Panthers over formerly unbeaten Gaithersburg

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer

This was how the county's latest, greatest rivalry was supposed to begin.

The undefeated Paint Branch and Gaithersburg girls basketball teams hosted a back-and-forth, down-to-the-wire classic on Wednesday night. It was their first clash since 2007, one of at least two this year, with a possible third distinctly possible — maybe even probable — for the 4A West Region championship.

But for three weeks, at least, the Panthers have the bragging rights. Round one went to them, 64-57.

"This was a great game; it reminded me of our Blake games," said Panthers head coach Heather Podosek. "I don't even remember the last time we played them. I think Ivan [Hicks] was still coaching them. ... I mean, I just love playing in 4A."

"They're a good team, really good," added Paint Branch junior Brene Moseley, who was the center of attention all night. As dynamic as any player in the county, the heavily-recruited guard had scouts from the University of Maryland and Richmond (Va.) watching her every move.

She didn't disappoint, finishing with a game-high 31 points. Her three-point play with just under 2 minutes left tied the score, and just as significantly, fouled out Trojans first-option Kara Marshall (18 points).

But the story was Kenia Cole.

Paint Branch's other junior guard had her best game of the season when it mattered most, putting in 19 points. She topped her season average (11.2 ppg) with 13 in the first half, giving the hosts a 5-point halftime advantage.

"I just wanted to come out [aggressive]," said Cole, the team's second-leading scorer.

Then she went quiet, until it mattered most.

With the game deadlocked and just over 90 seconds left, Cole stole an inbounds pass and hit a circus shot in the lane to put the Panthers (12-0 overall, 4-0 4A East Division) ahead for good, 57-55. After two Moseley free throws moments later, she struck the death knell with a breakaway layup to extend the lead to 6.

All six of her second-half points came in the fourth quarter.

"Kenia's a beast," said Podosek. "You know, she has Division I schools looking at her. ... She was huge for us."

Despite the loss, Gaithersburg (11-1, 2-1) proved every bit their counterparts equal, and offers dangers the Panthers likely haven't seen in awhile. For one, the Marshall sisters — including sophomore Colleen — got into the paint all night. Their 29 combined points was a lucky number for Paint Branch, as numerous point-blank shots rolled in and out.

Secondly, the Trojans can match the Panthers' trademark speed. Junior forward Sarah Seipp is a big reason why, offering a package few players in the county can match. Forgetting her ability to finish (14 points) and handle the ball, she repeatedly stripped ball-handlers on Wednesday — including Moseley several times — and was usually the quickest player to loose balls.