CCSF Captures State Title
Head Coach Justin Labagh wins his second state title

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By Marcus Tolero

The City College of San Francisco Rams Men’s Basketball Team are the kings of junior college basketball in California.

The Rams captured the California Community College Athletic Association state title after defeating defending champion Saddleback College Gauchos 68-57 on Sunday at Las Positas College in Livermore.

This is the third state title in the school’s history (1962 and 2011 previous titles). Head Coach Justin Labagh has now led two of the three teams to championship glory.

“This one is bittersweet. The first one (2011) was like a shock and a relief. This one is bittersweet in the fact that I just want to keep coaching these guys. This was just a really special group of guys,” Labagh said. “I just want to play another game with them and see who can beat us.”

After Sunday’s performance, it was evident that Labagh fielded what arguably can be considered the best Rams Basketball team in CCSF history.

The first half of Sunday’s heavyweight matchup between the two No. 1 seeds was dominated by the Rams. Guards sophomore Troy Thompson and freshman Zachary Copeland set the tone on the offensive end from beyond the arc. Between the two sharpshooters, they were 7-for-12 from three point range, good enough for 21 of the team’s 33 first-half points total. On the other end, the Rams full-court pressure and attacking approach on defense proved to be too much for the Gauchos. The Rams held Saddleback to 22 first-half points and forced 11 turnovers.

Labagh said the key to the victory was their preparation, and watching Saddleback’s matchup against Fresno City College the previous night.

“We really studied. We had three (Saddleback) games broken down on film. But the Fresno game was the most important because Fresno pressed and we were going to press them. So that game had a lot of the answers and helped us with the game plan,” Labagh said. “I knew that if we executed the game plan, I thought we could win. I wasn’t nervous. I never had a team that I have had more confidence in.”

In the second half, Saddleback adjusted their defense to minimize the threat of the Rams deadly three-point attack. But the adjustment opened up the interior for the CCCAA NorCal State Player of the Year and CCCAA Playoff MVP sophomore forward Jalen Canty. Canty dominated the paint in the second half and scored 13 of the team’s 35 second-half points. Although Saddleback scored 35 points in the second half as well, the Rams were in complete control of the game to the very end.
After the coaching staff and the team celebrated the school’s third state title, Labagh is already looking towards next year, especially with eight sophomores set to leave the program after the school year. “It’s hard. I remember (former CCSF Head Football Coach) George Rush said, ‘A guy leaves and it’s kind of sad – then all of a sudden another guy walks into the door who is a little different and you fall in love with that guy,’” he said.

Labagh and his staff are already planning the recruiting process to find the next group of Rams basketball players, and they know that the state title victory will be an attraction to the local basketball talent.

“You got to strike while the iron is hot,” Labagh jokingly said.

Right now, there is no hotter team in California.