

Young El Camino squad stop skid with gritty JC basketball win over Harbor

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A three-game losing streak? Ha. No problem.

That's how El Camino College looked at its predicament, heading into Friday's South Coast Conference game against rival Harbor.

Coach Michael Fenison just smiled.

"That's youth," he said, smiling. "We have 11 freshmen and sometimes they're clueless."

Sometimes? That drew a laugh.

"OK, all the time," he said.

Maybe El Camino is playing over its head with its youth, maybe not.

But the youngsters scored a 55-52 win over a veteran Harbor team that holds just as much confidence, and maybe a little more wisdom.

The South Bay teams have emerged as players on the statewide basketball scene. Both are ranked among the best in Southern California, and both entered the matchup in the state's top 25.

And both are going about it in different fashion based on their makeup.

El Camino (10-4) could have been fretting about a losing streak after a 9-1 start, but you weren't going to get that from this group.

"Confidence is never going to be shaken with this team," sophomore forward Cameron Gray said. "We've just got to stop penetration and play defense. That's what didn't happen when we were on the three-game losing streak. We're a confident group and we get that from our coach."

Harbor (10-6) has not lost any swagger

after falling to 0-2 in the South Division standings. In fact, the Seahawks even invented a new way to keep interested.

Coach Tony Carter-Loza started five sophomores against El Camino and didn't substitute until 12:14 was left in the first half. That's quite a spell to open the game, but there was a game within the game.

"We're not focused on wins and losses right now, we're focused on improvement, getting guys better, keeping guys together because it is a long haul," Carter-Loza said. "It's kind of my way to give a rotation time to kind of see where certain guys are."

So when it was time to sub, he sent five new



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players in. The original five were left in as long as they allowed a certain amount of points and the game was tied at 8-8.

"We were just trying to get fired up defensively," forward Dennis Hardwell (Carson High) said. "He challenged us basically to keep the team under a certain amount of points and then get subbed out. It really fired us up defensively, so I think it was a good move."

The only thing that shook either team was the collision that knocked out ECC guard Derrick Twiggs, who tried to run through an unseen pick by Jamal Washington with 4.5 seconds left in the game. Twiggs came to in less than a minute, but was transported to the hospital for observation.

The defeat hardly staggered the Seahawks, who entered conference play a year ago with a 4-9 record, then stormed back to capture the division crown.

"We have eight returners, so we're pretty mature," Hardwell said. "We'll get it together. I'm not worried. We're a pretty strong-minded group of guys, so we'll get back to it in practice and show it in the game on Wednesday."

Friday's game was tied 11 times and there were 10 lead changes, with the last one coming on Gray's 3-pointer from the left wing off an assist from freshman guard Joshua Wilson. That gave El Camino a 41-39 lead it was able to nurse to the buzzer.

Gray scored 15 points to lead El Camino and Wilson added 12. Jason Daley led Harbor with 11 points and Hardwell had seven points, nine rebounds and two blocks.

It's players like Wilson who have ECC belying its youth, which could be expected for a player coming from a state championship factory at Westchester High. Wilson, who had plenty of state banners to look at in his high school gym, doesn't miss the three pennants hanging at El

Camino, all earned under Coach Paul Landreaux.

"I look at them every day," Wilson said. "Coach Landreaux said I resemble Mark Wade from the '85 championship team. Coach Landreaux told me I have the ability to do that as well. But I could also score.

"I just have to figure out how to get my teammates involved early so I can take over late in games."

It's hardly a quiet confidence, and Harbor doesn't mind showing off its pride, either.

"The main thing you have to do is focus on every game," Carter-Loza said. "We tell our guys all 13 games weigh the same amount. Not one game is more important than another. We're 0-2, so it's all about Wednesday."

And on Feb. 8, they'll meet under Harbor's state banners from 1956 and 1975. A clash of pride, and maybe a conference title, will be on the line.

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