

Ha-Shilth-Sa Newspaper

Sam Laskaris, March 13, 2018

Langley, BC —

Despite winning just one of their final four games of the season, the Gold River Cougars were able to make a bit of history.

That's because for the first time in the school's 50-year history the senior boys' basketball squad from Gold River Secondary School qualified for its provincial championship.

The Cougars were one of 16 clubs that participated in the British Columbia high school Single A tournament, which concluded Saturday, March 10 in Langley.

Gold River's 11-player squad included five Nuuchahnulth athletes. All five Indigenous players are from the Mowachaht/Muchalat First Nation. They are starting point guard Dayton Jack, centre Logan Wilson, forwards Tyrell Murphy and Caleb Johnson and guard Warren McLean.

The Cougars qualified for their provincials by placing third at their Island championships in late February. The top three finishers at that event advanced to the B.C. tournament. Gold River was ranked last (16th) for the provincials.

Cougars' coach Stephen Larre said his squad knew they would be a huge underdog at the provincials. That's because St. Andrew's of Victoria, a team that had handily beat Gold River at its Island tournament, was only ranked a few spots ahead of the Cougars.

"Knowing that people at the provincial level had seen them and they were only ranked 11th or 12th in the tournament, let us know just how competitive this was going to be," Larre said.

It didn't take long for Gold River to see the high calibre of play at the provincials. The Cougars lost their opening match against top-ranked Credo Christian from Langley 99-36.

"They were a tough team," Larre said. "We were definitely expecting to be in tough against them. The level of play though was eye-opening for us."

Larre was pleased with the efforts from his charges against the tournament's No. 1 seed.

"Despite the fact we got down early the boys kept their heads up and kept playing," he said.

Gold River's second contest was a bit closer. The Cougars were downed 71-44 by Vanderhoof's Northside Christian, which was ranked ninth in the tournament.

“We were in it at the half,” Larre said of his side, which trailed 28-25 after the opening half. “But then we lost it in the second half.”

Following those two losses the Cougars moved on to relegation action.

First up was a match versus the Number 13 seed, the Golden Eagles. The Cougars were downed 62-54 in that outing.

“It was a very tough loss,” Larre said. “We were holding a decent lead in the final quarter. We were up by 10 points for sure early in the quarter.”

But Eagles’ captain John Oszust caught on fire, hitting six three-pointers in the final quarter to lead his club to victory.

“These were tough shots with defenders in his face,” Larre said of Oszust.

Despite that setback the Cougars managed to rebound and win their final match, 57-42 against Pemberton, the Number 14 seed.

With that triumph, Gold River officially placed 15th in the final standings.

“It was great for the kids,” Larre said. “We were thrilled just for the chance to be there. The fact we were able to get a win at the provincials was huge for us.”

Besides the five Indigenous players, Gold River’s squad also included guards Toby Leighton, Connor Creelman and Tyler Gedlaman, small forward Jared Gjesdal, centre Jacob Tarasoff and power forward Logan Rose.

The team also included manager Ellena Gjesdal, an administrative assistant at the school. The Cougars’ historic season also included a pair of tournament wins.

Gold River took top honours at the Basketball On The Edge event staged in Ucluelet in December. And it also won the Kings Of The North tournament held in Campbell River in January.

Larre also praised members of the community who quickly raised all the funds the team needed to travel to Langley after it found out it qualified for the provincials.

“Those donations paid for the whole trip,” Larre said. “Their travel, meals and hotels were all covered. For the community to come together like that, and with a snap of the fingers to send the boys there, that was remarkable.”