

St. Thomas More senior point guard Kaitlin LeBlanc, left, and junior forward Liz Freud get ready for Tuesday's practice. They're two of the main reasons the Ravens are 9-2 overall and aiming for a state tournament berth.

# St. Thomas More girls eye tourney

By Dave Hughes  
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MAGNOLIA — There's a growing excitement among the members of the St. Thomas More girls basketball team, a strong feeling that they're ready to take the next step on the road to becoming a premier program.

The Ravens lost a close game to Smyrna in the first round of last year's state tournament, but this time they'd like to go deeper. Even though St. Thomas More has made the tournament six times and won two tournament openers in past seasons under coach Mike LaPenta, the Ravens have never advanced beyond that stage.

Could it happen this year? Maybe. St. Thomas More (8-1 in the Diamond State Conference, 9-2 overall after defeating Wilmington Christian 43-37 on Monday) has an improving nucleus of talent, led by senior point guard and captain Kaitlin LeBlanc and junior post and wing forward

Liz Freud. Even though LaPenta has only three seniors on his roster, it's a group that could give teams some trouble in the post-season.

"We definitely want to get past the first round," said LeBlanc, who LaPenta describes as one of the best leaders he's seen in his many years as a basketball coach. "Last year we lost (49-47) and it was devastating, after we were ahead and they came back. Our goal is to get to the second round and hopefully past that. Right now our focus is on getting there."

LeBlanc, the Ravens' floor general who's averaging nine points and between four and five steals a game, says the team's talent is definitely deeper than when she started playing at St. Thomas More several years ago.

"We've gone from having a couple of decent players to five solid people on the court, and we have more depth on the bench," LeBlanc said. "A lot of the younger kids are starting to step up. We already

have some sophomores who are going to take our place next year."

Freud, who's 5-foot-9 and leads a balanced Ravens scoring attack with 10 points a game, is one of the program's emerging stars. A year-round player who's involved with an AAU team in Wilmington, she's a versatile offensive threat who can score both inside and outside. LaPenta also is getting nine points a game from 5-10 senior Karen Wearden, daughter of Wesley College women's basketball coach James Wearden.

"Since I was a freshman we've been getting better each year," Freud said. "Each year we just keep growing as a team and getting closer. I definitely think we're going to keep taking off."

LaPenta, who coached at Salesianum School in Wilmington during the 1980s, has been around the Ravens program pretty much since its inception a decade

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ago, while running a Rehoboth Beach sandwich shop with his wife for the past 25 years. He helped start St. Thomas More's junior varsity program and volunteered with the varsity before taking over as head coach four years ago.

"As a small school, with this program, our goal is to take those incremental steps, that's what you hope for," LaPenta said. "We want to get into that third-round game in the tournament."

"It would be nice just to compete in that second-round game. We've won tournament openers but then we've gotten buried. It would be nice to be able to do better."

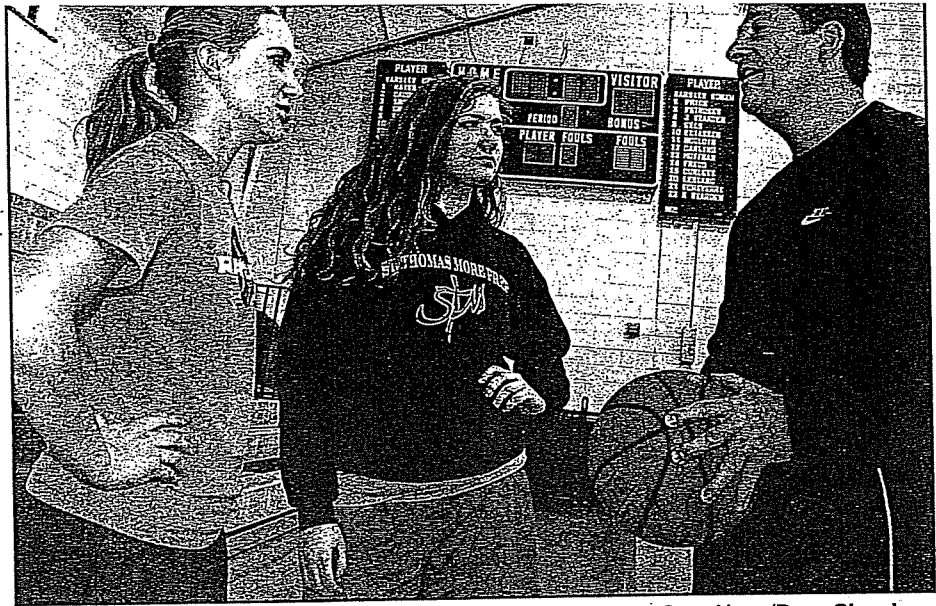
The Ravens are in capable hands with LeBlanc running the show. She possesses a calming influence on the court and LaPenta gushes about her leadership skills, which will be crucial come tournament time.

"She has incredible leadership abilities and the young kids look up to her," LaPenta said.

LeBlanc also can handle pressure situations, and LaPenta cited the example of Monday's win over Wilmington Christian, when she suffered a bad spill on the court and LaPenta feared she might have suffered a concussion.

"We were dying without her," LaPenta said.

Not only did LeBlanc talk the nurse into letting her return to the game, she settled everyone down and went on to lead the



Delaware State News/Dave Chambers

From left, St. Thomas More point guard Kaitlin LeBlanc and forward Liz Freud talk with coach Mike LaPenta before Tuesday's practice. The Ravens are hoping to advance beyond the first round of the state tournament this year.

team to the victory.

"She has every intangible skill any coach wants in any athlete," LaPenta said.

St. Thomas More started the season 8-0 before suffering back-to-back losses to Cape Henlopen and Archmere, and the Ravens hope to start another winning streak as the tournament approaches. The Ravens, who host Lake Forest on Thursday, were 15-7 last season.

They'll face a stiff test next Tuesday when they host unbeaten powerhouse St. Mark's.

"We're definitely ready to take the next step," Freud said. "We've kind of been at the lower end (tournament) the past couple of years, and we're ready to go to the next level of play."

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