

Riding Herd on Arizona 2A Basketball

Pima Lady 'Riders Gallop Toward Another State Title

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In southeastern Arizona's Gila Valley, summer temperatures can climb upwards of 112 degrees. In winter, the heat transfers to girls' basketball, especially on the hardwoods along a 23-mile stretch of U.S. 70 from Safford to Ft. Thomas. Stops along the way include traditional 2A power Thatcher, and 1A-turned-2A champion Pima. Though both schools compete in 2A, Thatcher has twice the enrollment; Pima is the smallest school in 2A's East region with 215 students. Yet a modest enrollment seems to have only spurred the Lady 'Riders on.

"They used to beat up on us," Pima head coach Brad Hemphill

said of Thatcher. "But since 2005, we've won seven of the last eight meetings." Thatcher used to beat up on everyone. The Eagles have landed in the 2A state finals 12 times since 1976, winning seven. The two schools are natural rivals being only five miles apart, and each school has largely dominated their respective class the past decade. Since 2002, the Lady 'Riders have played in four state finals (1A), winning championships in 2002 and 2003 by beating Ft. Thomas and Cibecue respectively, 61-48 and 50-33. Pima finished as runners-up to Ft. Thomas in 2006, and to Gilbert Surrey Garden in 2009.

Team-building 101

Before Hemphill took the reins of the Lady 'Rider program in 1996, the school had tried four different coaches in as many years. While far from hopeless, Hemphill had his work cut out for him; waking a program from hibernation is always a tough sell.

"At that time the program lacked continuity," Hemphill said. "The first thing we did as coaches was to earn the players' trust, show that we cared about them not only as players, but as people. We wanted them to feel like they were part of an exclusive program." Hemphill ordered top-of-the-line uniforms; he gave each player a water bottle and towel. Thoughtful, even classy, but Hemphill knew that building a program required much more.

"In the beginning," Hemphill said, "we decided to do the little things right: How we dress when we travel; not walking across the opponent's court out of uniform; and to take repetitive drills during practice seriously. Besides striving to be the best athletic program at our school, we set another goal: That when people think of Pima High School, they think of girls' basketball."

Hemphill asked himself how he could make girls' basketball the sport at Pima; he would know in four years whether to continue coaching or to return to just teaching English. Four years is a good measuring stick of program success, a span when the