

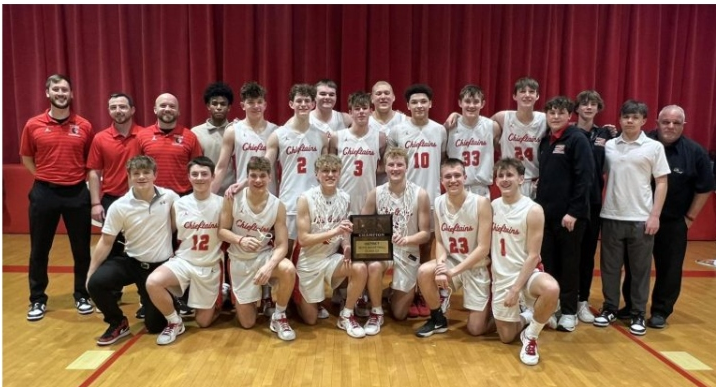
For the first time

Girls and boys basketball teams qualify for state simultaneously, making Yutan history

Anna Rupp

At Yutan High School, it is pretty common to see at least one successful team make it to state each season, whether from the boys or the girls, but this winter, for the first time in school history, both the girls and boys basketball teams qualified for the state tournament in the same year.

“Well, it’s great to see that the school in general is doing well. You know, obviously, as a part of the boys team, we want to see ourselves do well, but it’s great seeing the girls continue their success as well,” senior and boys captain AJ Arensberg said.



The boys basketball team poses for a photo after winning the district final. The boys beat Alma 42-36. (Courtesy photo)

Senior and girls captain Millie Dieckman agrees that it was a special moment for girls and boys qualifying for state at the same time.

“I would say it is an awesome experience. Just really incredible. I remember the moment the buzzer ran out during the girls’ district final, which was incredible itself. Then the moment the buzzer ran out for the boys’ game, which was also amazing because it meant both teams qualified for state, making Yutan history,” Dieckman said.

Qualifying for state is not an easy accomplishment, and the process took a lot of discipline and hard work for both boys and girls.

“It wasn’t easy; practice was not fun. It was hard work every single day, really pushing us to our limits. Coach Gardner is a great reason why we made state because he’s done it before, so he knows what it takes to make state,” senior and boys captain Owen Egr said. “And the process was, I wouldn’t say it wasn’t enjoyable, but it was hard work—but also enjoyable because we all love being there and love improving together and being able to make state together.”

For the boys, they had a strong focus on their goal of making it to the top of a mountain throughout the season and postseason.

“One thing that’s kind of been our motto for the season, and Gardner’s motto is, he kind of uses the metaphor of the season’s like a mountain,” Arensberg said. “So each challenge during the seasons is like a new peak, and our season as a whole is like the climb. So, using each other and relying on each other and just trying to get to the top of that mountain.”

The boys team hadn’t qualified for state in four years, so making it back to the tournament was really special for the team.

“I think that’s been really exciting for the boys because this was the first group where we didn’t have somebody on the team that had been in the state tournament, and two years ago, we lost in the district final,” head boys coach Jesse Gardner said. “I think they got the taste of being close but not making it. So I just think it’s exciting for this group because it’s new for all of them.”

Unlike the boys, the girls had been to state the past two years, winning the championship last year, but qualifying this year was special because the girls had lost four out of five of their starters from last year and were the underdogs throughout the season.

“It was really huge for our kids to get back after the state championship—obviously a lot of different kids playing and to get them that experience was really special. It also shows how much other kids have stepped up in the past year that didn’t have other roles and shows how much they’ve grown from smaller roles on the state champion team to huge roles. It shows a lot about work ethic and how much they’ve grown,” head girls coach Clay Carlton said.



Freshman Kale Hoffer reaches for a layup against Alma defenders. Hoffer played the center position for varsity and JV. (Kylie Krajicek)



Junior Mylee Tichota dribbles the ball down half court. Tichota scored 23 points in the district final. (Alexis Pehrson)

For the girls, their aims in making it to state and during state were having fun, playing hard and being themselves.

“I would say ‘just being yourself’ was something that we talked about a lot in the huddle and in practice. Just playing your game because we all had the skill set and knew what we needed to do to play,” junior and girls captain Mylee Tichota said.

To prepare for the state tournament, the girls did some scouting but also treated practice like a regular practice.

“We don’t treat it differently than anything else we do. Practices are very similar. We might watch a little more film and more as coaches, but otherwise preparing is a typical practice and not a lot different from regular game days,” Carlton said.

Meanwhile, the boys basketball team focused on their foundation from the beginning of the year.

“We gave them a day off after districts, and then we got after it right away. We really just went back to the fundamentals that we started the year with, all the things that got us there. We just tried to keep making good habits,” Gardner said.

As the seventh seed, the girls ended up losing the first round 53-28 to Crofton, the second seed, whom they beat last year in the state championship, yet the team were proud of how they battled.

“Obviously, we were down. We got down early. We were just sticking to it, and even when it got to a point where the game was a little out of our reach, just still playing hard and playing for Yutan and our community, and ending on a good note, not giving up even when the game wasn’t going our way,” Tichota said.

The boys came in as the two seed but ended up losing the first round 48-33 as well to West Holt, the seventh seed.

“We couldn’t take the lid off the basket. They had two taller individuals that contested everything at the rim. We just couldn’t ever get it rolling on offense,” junior and boys captain Carson Jurey said.

Even though the state tournament didn’t end how the boys and girls wanted it to, they still look back and recognize their accomplishments.

“The experience of coming together as a team, working together as a team and then making it to state was just really fun,” Dieckman said.



The girls basketball team poses for a photo after winning the district final. The girls beat Southern Valley 51-41. (Courtesy photo)