

Jayz'lee Waihi leads American Heritage girls basketball to win over Freedom Prep in 2A first round

Daily Herald | Feb 11, 2020



American Heritage junior guard Jayz'lee Waihi drives to the basket during the 60-39 Patriot win over Freedom Prep in the 2A first round in American Fork on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020.

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Imagine a high school athlete traveling halfway around the world and joining a basketball team in the middle of the season.

That's where American Heritage junior guard Jayz'lee Waihi was five weeks ago as she came from her native New Zealand to join the Patriots in American Fork.

"I feel like I settled in really quickly," Waihi said Tuesday. "The team was extremely welcoming. That's what I love about them. They are so caring and welcoming, no matter where you've been or where you are from. They've been so supportive, especially since my family is still back in New Zealand."

The combination of the American Heritage welcome and Waihi's own talent has proven to be a major asset for the Patriots.

"She is an amazing young lady," American Heritage head coach Paora Winitana said. "She understands the game at a level that very few athletes her age understand it. She has a feel for the

game and sees things develop. She's very talented and super-competitive. She wants to compete and is a good leader."



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American Heritage head coach Paora Winitana watches his team during the 60-39 Patriot win over Freedom Prep in the 2A first round in American Fork on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020.

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American Heritage senior guard Jenaya van der Beek (left) knocks the ball away during the 60-39 Patriot win over Freedom Prep in the 2A first round in American Fork on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020.

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American Heritage junior guard Aleah Maxfield shoots a shot during the 60-39 Patriot win over Freedom Prep in the 2A first round in American Fork on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020.

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American Heritage sophomore forward Izzy Stratton (right) shoots a shot during the 60-39 Patriot win over Freedom Prep in the 2A first round in American Fork on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020.

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That was evident as Waihi poured in 30 points to lead the Patriots to their first ever state tournament victory, defeating Provo-based Freedom Prep in the 2A first round game in American Fork Tuesday, 60-39.

“I didn’t know the history but seeing the excitement of the other girls made me excited,” Waihi said. “All of the positive energy reflects back and affects everyone.”

American Heritage seized control with big runs to start both halves. The Patriot defense stymied the Eagles early as the home team scored the game’s first 15 points.

“We’ve been preparing for this,” Waihi said. “Our approach is to treat every game like it is your last because you never know what might happen. We want to give it our all for each other, for our families and for our coaches.”

Freedom Prep tried to mount a comeback behind the outside shooting of sophomore guard Maida Etxezarraga (who made five 3-pointers on her way to 18 points) and the fiery aggressiveness of senior guard Katie Kinnan (who fearlessly attacked the paint and tallied 21 points).

“They have given us fits all year,” Winitana said. “We told the girls to not give Etxezarraga a look and she still made five 3-pointers. Kinnan was giving us more fits tonight with her penetrating.”

But in the end Waihi and her American Heritage teammates used a 16-3 run to start the second half to extend the lead and then cruise to victory. Waihi played a big part in that spurt, scoring 14 straight points but said it's all a credit to her team.

"I try to identify what strengths my teammates have and then use those," Waihi said. "They have to set screens and make cuts and passes for me. It's always a team effort. The more confidence we get, the stronger we are as a unit."

The Patriots know they will need every bit of cohesion and ability to continue in the 2A tournament, since next up is No. 1-ranked North Summit.

"We know it is going to be a big challenge," Waihi said. "They are the No. 1 team for a reason. We're going to give everything we have. We respect them but we will be fearless, do what we can do and leave everything out on the floor."

Winitana agreed that the Braves have earned their spot. North Summit is 21-1 this year with its only loss come to Class 4A-foe Ridgeline.

"Confidence as a team comes from progression," Winitana said. "We'll watch video and prepare so we can go in confident and be in position to give our absolute best. It's an honor to play them."

American Heritage (10-9, 7-4) will square off against the Braves in the 2A second at Snow College on Friday at 11:50 a.m.