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## **Pacesetter Sweet 16**

# **Alexandria boys & Hopkins girls are champs**



**Right, Alexandria's Chase Thompson muscles past Hopkins' Daveion Hart during the Cardinals' 62-59 finals win.**

**Below, Hopkin's Erma Walker snags a rebound over Eden Prairie's Jazzy Hooks during the Royals' 88-57 finals win.**

Photos by Bruce Strand

### **BOYS TOP 3**

- (1) Alexandria**
- (2) Hopkins**
- (3) Breck**

### **GIRLS TOP 3**

- (1) Hopkins**
- (2) Eden Prairie**
- (3 )Minnetonka**



# Alexandria (1st time) and Hopkins (9th time) prevail

By Bruce Strand

Alexandria captured the Pacesetter Sweet 16 boys championship for the first time, getting a game-tying basket at the buzzer and fending off Hopkins 62-59 in overtime on Aug. 3.

Meanwhile, the Hopkins girls won the tournament for the ninth time. Hopkins beat Lake Conference rival Eden Prairie 88-57 in the finals. Eden Prairie was champion in 2022, ending Hopkins' eight-year reign. Hopkins didn't play last year while Eden Prairie finished third. Minnetonka won 62-59 over Providence Academy and both won high school titles in March.

The Pacesetter Sweet 16, in its 35th year, held Saturday/Sunday at College of St. Benedict's, is an annual August showcase of top teams from all four classes thrown into one pot. The brackets often have a team from each class in each group of four teams. The field of teams is annually the best gathering of Minnesota teams under one roof all year and provides an excellent forecast for the upcoming season.

Alexandria, down 57-55 after Hopkins made one of two free shots with 10 seconds left, quickly got the ball down the floor and into the hands of Chase Thompson. The 6-foot-7 star forward (also the football team's quarterback) knotted the score just before the horn.

In overtime, Hopkins' Jayden Moore slashed for a layup off the opening tip, but that would be the only points for the Royals in the two-minute extra session. Mason Witt canned a three-pointer to give Alex the lead and Thompson made it 62-59 with two free shots. Moore was fouled shooting a three-point at the buzzer and had a chance to tie it, but missed his first attempt and there was no reason to shoot the next two.

Alexandria, 4-for-4 in tournaments this summer, reached the finals defeating Wayzata 70-57 and Mankato East 61-52. Thompson was dominant throughout the tournament. Also contributing were Grady Starzl, Samson Hagstrom, Blake Scholl, Thomas Hinrichs, Myles Gray, Gavin Roderick, Mason Witt, and Talan Witt.



**Javon Watson (with ball) was fouled by Chase Thompson on a loose ball scramble and made one of two free shots late in the game.**

"We have had a great summer of basketball," said Forrest Witt, Alexandria coach, "with numerous kids improving throughout our program and benefiting from their hard work in the off-season. Our teams have had really good success in summer tourneys, with our varsity going 13-0 in four tournaments."

Zach Witt, Forrest's brother, who coaches the Cardinal freshmen, took the helm for the Sweet 16 as regular coaches are not allowed after Aug. 1.

"It's summer basketball and the kids would rather obviously win a state high school championship," Zach Witt said, "but it was great to win games against some great competition."



He praised the squad for stout defense, sharp shooting, and unselfish play, and added, "When they step on the court, they expect to win. Losing is not an option in their minds."

Hopkins, led by their high-scoring guards Moore and Anthony Smith, and forward JJ Semanko, reached the finals beating Orono 73-60, Cherry 93-63, and Breck 62-57. They were coached by P.J. Moore.

Alexandria placed fourth in the Class 3A tournament in March. Among their graduates was Gophers' recruit Grayson Grove.



**Hopkins' Jayden Moore hit a layup in overtime against Alexandria.**

Breck captured third place. The Mustangs, fresh from winning their first state title in Class 2A, and minus their Mr. Basketball finalist Daniel Frietag, beat Mankato East 82-59 in the third-place game. They scuttled Sauk Rapid-Rice 85-69 and Ada-Borup West 78-37 before losing to Hopkins.

Wayzata nabbed fifth place, Albany seventh place, and Orono the consolation championship.

The Hopkins girls, state Class 4A runners-up in March, beat Cass Lake-Bena 96-35 and Eden Prairie 73-64 in pool play, then clipped Providence Academy 72-39 in the semifinals.

In the finals, the Royals faced Eden Prairie again. The Eagles stuck with Hopkins for 2 1/2 quarters, but the Royals blew them out the rest of the way.

Erma Walker, sophomore-to-be, was a powerful presence on the blocks for Hopkins. Other starters were Lauren Hillesheim, Jaliyah Diggs (transfer from Park Center), Maliyah White and Tatum Woodson. Coaching them were DeeDee Winston and TeeTee Sparks.

Minnetonka, the reigning state Class 4A champion,



**Jaliyah Diggs of Hopkins scored against Providence Academy, pursued by Hope**

beat Providence Academy 87-60 for third place. Both teams were missing their top players. Providence Academy's superstar Maddyn Greenway and her sister Beckett played Saturday before leaving on a family vacation.

Caledonia captured the consolation championship for fifth place.



**Rae Ehrman of Eden Prairie scored on a fast break in the finals against Hopkins.**

# GREAT 5-STATE GIRLS CHAMPS

Red Lake County Central and Buffalo, S.D., were the victors in the final two championship games of Pacesetter's annual Great Five-State tournament on Thursday, Aug. 15.

RLCC won the seventh-grade girls title, defeating St. Francis, 26-23, in the finals at Target Center.

Buffalo took the sixth-grade girls top honors, defeating Hawley 35-18 in the finals. The South Dakotans beat

Willmar 34-11 in the semifinals earlier in the day while Hawley nipped Bemidji 30-28 (three overtimes). Bemidji tripped Willmar 25-7 for third place.

Most of the Great Five-State championships were decided in July. This is a competition for teams in grades 4-9 from Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin, culminating with championships at Target Center and attendance at a Lynx game. (Further information at [www.pacesettersports.net](http://www.pacesettersports.net).)



## RED LAKE COUNTY CENTRAL

### 7TH GRADE GIRLS

Left to right: Coach Jarrod Johnson, Aaliyah Bramer, Brynley Kavasager, Naomi Stordahl, Fayth Stordahl, Hadley Petry, Aubrey Halverson, Isabelle Paradis, Jordan Johnson, Kierra Baker, coach Ryan Paradis

## BUFFALO (S.D.)

### 6TH GRADE GIRLS

Players left to right: Whitley Wendt, Brylee Crago, Camden Peterson, Maci Wammen, Jazlyn Page, Kalla Padden, Tatum Tetrault, Kimber Cordell.  
Coaches left to right: Jay Wammen, Michelle Padden





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# GIRLS SWEET 16 SNAPSHOTS



**Lauren Hillesheim of Hopkins races to the hoop on a fast break with Eden Prairie's Cam Dennin and Rae Ehrman in pursuit.**



**Caledonia's Kensey King scores against Kelliher-Northome.**



**Maiya Slusarczyk of STMA eyes the basket.**



**Vanessa Jordan of Eden Prairie drives the lane, guarded closely by Hopkins' Jaliya Diggs.**



**Minnetonka's Ari Peterson, formerly of Providence Academy, heads to the hoop, trailed by Eden Prairie's Addie Fine.**



**Emma Millerbernd of P.A. hits a layup.**



**Ali Lundin, Kelliher-Northome, drives against Kayli Bigalke of STMA.**



# BOYS SWEET 16 SNAPSHOTS



**Samson Hagstrom of Alexandria slices through the lane during the Cardinals' finals win over Hopkins.**



**Breck's DeAngelo Dungey eyes the hoop. His team places third.**



**Spencer Swenson (green) of Sauk Rapids-Rice beats Albany's Braeden Justin to a loose ball.**



**Albany's Sam Hondl soars for two.**

**Mankato East's Lucas Gustafson beats Breck down the floor to score.**



**Wayzata's Nick Nordaune takes aim.**



# SWEET 16 CHAMPIONS



## ALEXANDRIA

Grady Starzl, Samson Hagstrom, Blake Scholl, Thomas Hinrichs, Chase Thompson, Myles Gray, Gavin Roderick, Mason Witt, Talan Witt, Zach Witt (coach)



## HOPKINS

Front: Avery Weber, Cici Adler, Tatum Woodson, Harper Peterson, Bryn Steinburg, Lanaia Durant, Jaliyah Diggs, Inarah Nesbitt. Back: Deedee Winston (coach), Ella Roberts, Iesha Mohamoud-Squires, Amari Johnson, Reece Watson, London Harris, Erma Walker, Lauren Hillesheim, Ava Smith, Maliyah White, TeeTee Starks (coach)



# SWEET 16 RUNNERS-UP



## HOPKINS

**PJ Moore (coach), JJ Semanko, Jayden Moore, Daveion Hart, Julis Ellis, Anthony Smith, Tre Moore, Javon Watson**



## EDEN PRAIRIE

**Front: Emerson Johnson, Abby Valiton, Cam Dennin, Rubi Rock, Jazzy Hooks  
Back: Addi Dvoracek, Addie Fine, Vanessa Jordan, Rae Ehrman, Ziwi Simbeye, Lauren Santy, Addison Krueger, coach Crawford Jordan**

# A refugee's long hoops journey

## *Mahtomedi's Omot sparkles in Olympics*

*This feature consists of two articles that originally appeared in the White Bear Press*

**By Bruce Strand**

Nuni Omot was working on his fledgling basketball skills the summer before his freshman year at Mahtomedi when he posed a question for Keith Newman, the varsity coach.

"He pointed over to the court where the varsity guys were playing," Newman recalls, "and said, 'How do I get over there?'"

Omot has been asking that question ever since and doing whatever it takes to get that next level — varsity star as a senior; three college teams, capped by a good year at Baylor; NBA G League stints; several pro teams overseas; and now, the Olympic Games.

***At the Olympics, Omot scored 50 points in three games, including a game-high 24 against Team USA. South Sudan beat Puerto Rico and lost to USA and Serbia. More details on Omot's Olympics at the end of this article.***

The 2013 MHS graduate who was born in a refugee camp in Kenya is a member of the South Sudan team that's one of the 12 qualifiers for the Olympic Games in Paris.

"I'm extremely excited and fortunate," Omot said in a text, "to be in this situation. It's been a long time coming and a very tough journey that's all been well worth it."

South Sudan is the youngest country in the world, formed in 2011, and its basketball team's swift rise the

last two years is attracting attention, including three pages in Sports Illustrated's pre-Olympics edition this month.

Omot helped South Sudan qualify for the 2023 FIBA World Cup for the first time and Bright Stars (their nickname) placed 17th, with three wins, which was the highest of the African teams. Omot averaged 14.4 points in the tournament in Manila, Philippines.



**Nuni Omot, who scored 50 points in three games at the Olympics, was interviewed.**

That's what qualified South Sudan for the Olympics, slated for July 27 through August 11.

"No one ever imagined or dreamed of (us) being in this position," an emotional Omot commented to reporters after the World Cup. "No one would have ever imagined this a couple years ago ... People don't understand, we don't have a single indoor court in our country ... Now we have a chance to walk across the Olympic stage carrying our flag."

"It's one of the greatest sports stories to come out in a long time. I am blessed to be a part of it."

In the game that clinched South Sudan's qualification for the World Cup, Omot tallied 26 points in an 83-75 win over Senegal. This past May,

South Sudan won the Basketball Africa League (BAL) championship with a 3-2 record. Omot was tournament MVP, averaging 18.9 points and 3.9 rebounds.

South Sudan, long wracked by ethnic violence and civil war, became a country in 2011 when its citizens voted overwhelmingly to secede from Sudan. Their basketball federation was established in 2012.



Anunwa Omot (he's always gone by his nickname, Nuni) was born in the Kenyan refugee camp after his family fled a civil war in their native Ethiopia. The first three years of his life were spent in the camp, under difficult conditions. The family was able to move to Minnesota with the help of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services. His mother, Pillow, and siblings emigrated, but his father, Kwot, was denied passage due to a medical condition. Omot didn't see his dad again for 21 years.

His older brother, Aba, served as a surrogate father. Aba told the Press that Nuni will have a rooting gallery in Paris consisting of himself, their mother, two aunts, cousins, and friends.

At Mahtomedi, Omot tried football and soccer before finding his niche in basketball. He was still on the junior varsity as a junior but blossomed his senior year, averaging 18 points as a 6-foot-6 forward.

"Nuni just absolutely loved to play basketball," Newman said. "He eventually matured and his skills got well above where he started, because of his strong work ethic. I am so proud that he will play in the Olympics."

Omot played one year at Concordia-St. Paul, then switched to a junior college power, Indian Hills, in Iowa, to get Division I exposure. Having grown to 6-foot-9, he averaged 12.4 points and showed excellent shooting ability.

Baylor, a perennial Top 20 team in Texas, offered him a scholarship. He played two years for the Bears, averaging 9.9 points as a senior in 2017-18.

His length, agility and shooting accuracy, including three-pointers, have earned him several pro opportunities, including G League stints with affiliates of the Nets, Knicks and Magic of the NBA, and teams in Holland, Turkey, Germany, China, Puerto Rico, Egypt, France and Israel.

South Sudan is coached by Luol Deng, a Sudanese native who, like other team members, has a refugee background. Deng arrived in the U.S. at age 14, played for Duke and had a 16-year NBA career with five teams. Deng is the big reason for South Sudan's emergence, as he invested his own money and recruited players with Sudanese roots. To help coach, he enlisted his New Jersey high school coach, Joe Mantegna, and a high school teammate, Harlem native Royal Ivey, also an NBA veteran.

And the new nation of South Sudan — slightly smaller than Texas, population just under 11 million — suddenly had a band of sports heroes to root for. "The support has been unmatched. Nothing like it," Omot said.

### **Omot sank 24 in loss to USA**

After an impressive Olympic Games showing last week in Paris, Mahtomedi graduate Nuni Omot posted a brief and hopeful message on social media. It read: "Any team that gives me a chance, I promise you won't regret it."

The 6-foot-9 forward for South Sudan pumped in 50 points in three games — highlighted by scoring a game-high 24 points against Team USA — and hoped his performance would impress any NBA team to give him a look at age 29, as he expressed in his 13-word entreaty on "X," formerly Twitter.

Omot averaged 16.7 points against teams dotted with NBA players as South Sudan defeated Puerto Rico 90-79, lost to USA 103-86, and lost to Serbia 96-85, in pool play. He shot 16-for-39 overall, 7-for-18 on three's, and 11-for-12 at the line, while snagging 10 rebounds.

The loss to Serbia eliminated South Sudan from advancing to the medal round, but they made a respectable showing for a first-time Olympics entrant, not to mention also losing to USA by just one point, 101-100, in a pre-Olympics tune-up in London.

Omot had 12 points and six rebounds in the win over Puerto Rico. Against Team USA, he shot 8-for-12 overall (5-for-7 on three's) for 24 points, and South Sudan outscored the U.S. in his 28 minutes of play. USA had six double digit scorers, including Anthony Edwards of the Timberwolves with 13. Bam Adebayo of the Miami Heat led with 18. Against Serbia, Omot notched 14 points. Serbia's Nikola Jokic, the NBA's Most Valuable Player this year for the Denver Nuggets, had 22 points and 13 rebounds. Brogan Bobdonovic of the Brooklyn Nets logged 30 points,

In a press conference prior to the Olympics Omot told reporters: "For me, I feel like this is going to be a real big opportunity for myself, for people across the world to see who I really am as a player on the global stage. Obviously, I never played at the highest level in the NBA, I never played at the highest level in Europe, in Euro League, so my thing is just to show it's never been talent that's the issue. It's just obviously people being able to see it live and against the best people, so I think this is going to be a huge thing for me."

# Pacesetter Sweet 16 scores

## BOYS

### First three rounds

Breck 85, Sauk Rapids-Rice 69  
Breck 78, Ada-Borup West 37  
Sauk Rapids-Rice 91, Ada-Borup West 68  
Hopkins 73, Orono 60  
Cherry 70, Waseca 66, OT  
Wayzata 84, Dawson-Boyd 59  
Alexandria 78, Caledonia 56  
Mankato East 66, Farmington 40  
Albany 71, Heritage Christian 60  
Hopkins 93, Cherry 63  
Alexandria 70, Wayzata 57  
Mankato East 80, Albany 62  
Hopkins 62, Breck 57  
Alexandria 61, Mankato East 52

### Championship

Alexandria 64, Hopkins 61, OT

### Third place

Breck 82, Mankato East 69

### Fifth place

Sauk Rapids-Rice 95, Cherry 77  
Wayzata 83, Albany 45  
Wayzata 102, Sauk Rapids Rice 85

### Seventh place

Albany 83, Sauk Rapids-Rice 78

### Consolation rounds

Orono 68, Waseca 50  
Caledonia 76, Dawson-Bpyd 62  
Farmington 76, Heritage Christian 44  
Orono 64, Ada-Borup West 54  
Caledonia 86, Farmington 74

### Consolation championship

Orono 85, Caledonia 63

### Consolation third place

Ada-Borup West 66, Farmington 64, OT

### Consolation fifth place

Dawson-Boyd 67, Waseca 46  
Waseca 61, Heritage Christian 60  
Dawson-Boyd 68, Heritage Christian 53



**Erma Walker of Hopkins jostled for rebound position with Eden Prairie's Abby Valiton and Jazzy Hooks.**

## GIRLS

### Pool A

Providence Academy 80, Mayer Lutheran 40  
St. Michael-Albertville 74, Mayer Lutheran 42  
Providence Academy 79, St. Michael-Albertville 44

### Pool B

Hopkins 96, Cass Lake-Bena 35  
Eden Prairie 64, Kelliher-Northome 31  
Hopkins 73, Eden Prairie 64

### Pool C

Minnetonka 64, Hancock 38  
Caledonia 53, Minneota 27  
Minnetonka 66, Caledonia 60

### Semifinals

Hopkins 72, Providence Academy 39  
Eden Prairie 68, Minnetonka 58

### Championship

Hopkins 91, Eden Prairie 57

### Third place

Minnetonka 87, Providence Academy 60

### Consolation rounds

Caledonia 67, Kelliher-Northome 27  
Hancock 62, St. Michael-Albertville 58  
Caledonia 58, Hancock 32 (championship)  
St. Michael-Albertville 84, Kelliher-Northome 54 (3rd place)  
Mayer Lutheran 65, Cass Lake-Bena 47  
Cass Lake-Bena 68, Minneota 58  
Mayer Lutheran 66, Minneota 33 (5th place)



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