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Palomar's Kristin Marquardt stretches to shoot during a game against MiraCosta on Saturday.  
Photo by John Koster - For The North County Times.

## WOMEN'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE BASKETBALL: MiraCosta on the ascent, but still can't catch Palomar

By JOHN MAFFEI - Staff Writer

SAN MARCOS ---- It's not a rivalry until both teams are capable of winning.

Last season, after a 12-year absence, the MiraCosta College women's basketball team wasn't capable of beating Highway 78 rival Palomar College, losing to the Comets by 24 points in each of the two games.

MiraCosta lost again on Saturday night, but Spartans were competitive this time. They dropped a 71-59 Pacific Coast Conference decision before a large and lively crowd in the Dome. The win was the 21st straight in conference for Palomar.

"We're a completely different team," MiraCosta guard Sage LeBlanc said. "Tiffany Hunter and I are the only players back from last season. And we have a bunch of freshmen who can play. It's exciting.

"I think we proved something. We didn't back down. We boxed out on rebounds, and we played defense.

"It's fun to play the better teams, and Palomar has a really good team. We get them at our place in the second round (on Feb. 11). That should be fun."

Comets head coach Sherri Jennum wasn't having any fun at the start of the game as MiraCosta jumped

out to a 5-0 lead on a 3-pointer and a pair of free throws by Megan Conroy. Jennum called a timeout 90 seconds into the game and got her team's attention.

Trailing 8-6, Palomar went on a 19-2 run to build a 15-point lead. The Comets, who are ranked No. 5 in the state, still led by 13 (47-34) with 14:45 to play in the game, but then it was MiraCosta's turn to make a run.

The Spartans, who are 9-9, 2-2 after a 6-20 season, went on a 17-6 run to cut the deficit to 53-51 with 8:30 remaining.

It was 57-55 with 6:50 to play before Palomar (16-4, 4-0) went on a 12-1 run to put the game away.

"This is a rivalry game, and you better come to play," Jennum said. "MiraCosta has a nice team. But we No. 5 in the state, and we're going to see everyone's best game. Teams are pumped up and play with intensity against us. But we have a lot of weapons."

The Comets were without one of those weapons against MiraCosta. Nicole Wilhite, the team's second-leading scorer at 12.3 points per game, has been out since late December with an ankle sprain.

Speedy guard Kiara Stinson and center Lauren Matheney led Palomar on Saturday with 16 points each. Matheney added 11 rebounds.

Kristin Marquardt, who is being recruited by several NCAA Division I schools, added 15 points and 12 rebounds.

"MiraCosta has improved a lot," Marquardt said. "They played us like a true rival tonight, really gave us a great game."

"We know we have to play them tough now. Last year (in a 27-6 season), there were too many blowouts, and we weren't as prepared for the postseason as we could have been. These kind of games, close and intense, will make us better."

Hunter led MiraCosta with 18 points and grabbed a team-high seven rebounds. LeBlanc added 11 points. Conroy finished with eight.

"We made it interesting, but Palomar is still a little too fast for us," said MiraCosta coach Dan Mulville. "I'm pleased with our effort, but we had a couple of dry spells."

"I think you can see our programs has definitely improved. We play hard, and we play physical. We're getting there, that's for sure."