

Riverton earns first 5A state title

Silverwolves clamp down on Layton in fourth quarter to claim crown

By Jon Clifford
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The rims were lowered after the game, so that the champion Riverton girls' basketball players could each cut a piece of twine as a keepsake.

But by the elation in their faces and euphoria in their voices, the Silverwolves were high enough to cut down the nets without hydraulic assistance.

Riverton won its first basketball title with a 41-37 victory against Layton in Saturday's Class 5A state championship game at Salt Lake Community College, a final score every bit indicative of the slugfest waged between the teams.

The Silverwolves did it with defense. They did it on the boards. They did it with senior leadership. And they did it on the biggest stage.

"This is huge for our school," said senior Gerrika Ballard, who overcame food poisoning Friday night to lead Riverton with 13 points. "This was my senior year, my last game that I get to play with all my friends. I left with no regrets."

Senior forward Whitney Saunders dominated the boards, and grabbed a game-high 12 rebounds — five on the offensive end — despite giving up two inches to Layton center Jaden Anderson. Riverton (22-3) had 17 offensive rebounds in the game, which set up second, third, even fourth chances on key possessions late.

Riverton trailed 29-25 with 3:23 to play in the third quarter, but allowed just two Layton field goals the rest of the way.

"It was intense," said Saunders, who scored nine points. "We couldn't say we can save something for the next game. We had to play out hearts out. I'm so proud of everybody, especially Gerika. She was throwing up sick."

Maddi Smith scored 13 points and Anderson added 11 for the Lancers (17-8), who twice trailed by as many as seven points.

Outside shots weren't falling, so Riverton pounded the ball inside. Jamie Smith made the



Whitney Saunders hugs coach Ron Ence during Riverton's post-game championship celebration.

team's only three-pointer for a 34-33 lead with 6:49 to play, but Riverton missed its other seven shots beyond the arc.

Ballard, who finished 6-of-8 from the field, scored on an assist from Shelby Richards with 16.2 seconds left for a 40-37 lead. Layton's chance to tie ended with a Richards steal and free throw for the final margin.

Richards had four assists, three of which came on drives in the paint to draw multiple defenders, then a pass to find the open teammate near the rim.

"That's my favorite play," said Richards, a junior. "I can go to the basket, they think I'm going to attack and I've got my teammate, and they've got my back. I just dump it in and they finish it."

"We knew if we wanted to be state champs we can't give up. We had to keep fighting — get those rebounds and get putbacks, box out, get low, hustle on defense, get in their heads. Everything it takes to be state champion."