

Riverton claims first 5A title

Ballard, Saunders lead long list of heroes as Silverwolves make school history with win

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— Gerika Ballard

By Trevor Phibbs
Deseret News

Riverton coach Ron Ence frantically motioned for a timeout. Gerika Ballard bowed in pain, tears gushing down her face. Her pale complexion explained her grimacing expressions.

Ballard was sick.

"I was throwing up last night. This morning, I just took a spoonful of liquid and saltine crackers. (That) is basically what I ate," she said. "Every time I sat down I felt like I was going to puke."

Her mother quickly rushed to the bench after the timeout was granted. Ballard needed gum to combat the seemingly everlasting aftertaste of nausea.

But her tears quickly subsided. The senior wasn't about to forgo the 5A girls state championship Saturday at Salt Lake Community College.

With the Silverwolves struggling to hold a one-point lead against Layton with 30 seconds remaining, Riverton's Pume Currie dodged the Lancers' full-court press before spotting Shelby Richards at the top of the key. Richards penetrated, and as defenders closed, dumped a no-look bounce pass to Ballard, who kissed a layup off the glass in



Gerika Ballard, Whitney Saunders and Pume Currie celebrate near the end of the game.

traffic.

The basket was enough leeway — after the Silverwolves subsequently forced a turnover — to allow Riverton to capture its first basketball championship in school history, 41-37.

"Just knowing that it was my senior year and it was my last game, I wanted to leave no regrets on the floor," said Ballard, with color returning to

her face for the first time. "And that's what I did."

Ballard tied a game high with 13 points and snagged four rebounds.

Saturday's girls basketball title is Riverton High's first outside of track (3) since the school opened its doors in 1999.

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RIVERTON BASKETBALL: Silverwolves 41, Layton 37

COACH ENCE'S COMMENTS: Because Layton upset Bingham in the other semifinal, our coaching staff had to scramble to figure our strategy in this game.

We met in my office at noon on Saturday. We upset Layton in last year's quarterfinal, so we knew about them. Our teams shared similar characteristics. Overall, I felt we were a deeper and a more athletic team, but if we don't play all out, those advantages will be useless.

Twice we built seven-point leads, but Layton stayed strong and ending up taking a four-point lead on us near the end of the third quarter. But a quick flurry of points put us 31-31 to start the fourth.

Near the end, we made several huge plays. As Layton's best player drove to the basket, Whitney stepped in front and earned a charge. Next was a textbook press breaker. The ball reversed in backcourt to Pume and she sped up the sideline. When guarded, she delivered the ball to Shelby, who immediately attacked the hoop and passed to Gerika for a layup and a foul.

Now up three points with 16 seconds to go, the Layton guard stumbled as she began to drive and lost the ball to Shelby. She was fouled with three seconds left and put us up by 4. I glanced up at the score board and my heart about jumped out of my body. Riverton just won its first 5A girls basketball championship.

GAME SUMMARY

Riverton	11	9	11	10	-	41
Layton	7	9	15	6	-	37

RIVERTON (41) – Mallory Bostic 2 1-2 5, Jamie Smith 2 2-2 7, Gerika Ballard 6 1-7 13, Shelby Richards 0 2-6 2, Whitney Saunders 3 3-4 9, Tiena Afu 2 0-0 4, Pume Currie 0 1-2 1. Totals 15 10-23 41.

LAYTON (37) – Cassidy Anderson 1 2-2 4, Ashley Price 1 4-4 7, Meagan Sorensen 0 0-0 0, Maddi Smith 3 6-8 13, Livia Treseder 1 0-0 2, Jaden Anderson 5 1-3 11, Taylor Moore 0 0-0 0, Shelby Green 0 0-0 0, Megan Short 0 0-0 0. Totals 11 13-17 37.

Total fouls: Layton 19, Riverton 14. **Fouled out:** None.

Three-point goals: Riverton 1 (Smith), Layton 2 (Price, Smith).

All-tournament team

MVP – WHITNEY SAUNDERS (RIVERTON)

Shelby Richards (Riverton) Shelbee Molen (Fremont)
Ashley Price (Layton) Jilian Powell (Bingham)
Maddi Smith (Layton)

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“Our school has only taken a few in track,” Ballard said of Riverton, which has the largest enrollment in the state. “We’ve always dreamed, and wanted to go on and take the next step. This is the next step for our school to go on and do bigger and better things.”

Riverton's Whitney Saunders, the *Deseret News* All-Tournament MVP, finished with nine points and 12 rebounds, including seven offensive.

“I’m very proud of the girls because we still had a shot. ... They just couldn’t come up with it,” Layton coach Van Price said. “(Riverton) is so athletic. That’s a very good team — just a step quicker than us.”

Jamie Smith chipped in seven points for Riverton and Richards, although limited offensively, dished out four assists and was the catalyst on defense.

“We did it,” Richards exclaimed. “We stuck together and fought so hard. I knew this was going to be a great season with the potential and talent we had on this team. If we gave everything we’ve got (there was) no doubt in my mind this team could take a state championship.”

For Layton, it was a bittersweet ending to a stellar season that the Lancers refused to let slip away after suffering three straight region losses to close the regular season.

“The end of the season was on a down note. We had a talk about remembering who we are, the hard work,” said Price, whose team overcame a 14-point halftime deficit in the quarterfinals and upset No. 1 Bingham in the semifinals.

On Saturday, the ‘Wolves (22-3) forced the Lancers (17-8) to open 0-for-6 with five turnovers in the first six minutes, and surged out to a 7-0 lead when Richards found Ballard on a drive-and-dish.

Maddi Smith finally ignited the Layton offense with a wing three-pointer with 38.7 seconds remaining in the first and eventually pulled her team within 20-16 at halftime.

After Cassidy Anderson connected on two free throws, Riverton found itself trailing 33-31 to begin the fourth. It turned toward Jamie Smith. As the ball trickled from the corner, Mallory Bostic found Richards, who instinctively delivered a touch pass to Smith.

Despite a tough shooting night, Smith squared her feet and buried it.

“She wasn’t lighting it up but she was playing much more confident,” said Ence. “Earlier in the year, she’d miss a shot and stop shooting. I said, ‘Keep shooting. That’s what the good ones do.’ And she made a big three there.”

The ‘Wolves never relinquished the lead again.