

Big first half fuels Soaring Eagle's highlights

By Bruce Smith
MatchupUT.com

The end of Juan Diego's 40-36 victory over Judge Memorial on Jan. 13 appeared more like a state tournament championship.

The Soaring Eagle had defeated their rival for the first time on their opponent's home court. It ended a long drought and, at the time, seemed to show fans that there was a new sheriff in town in Region 11.

It didn't work out that way but, for that one night, the team felt like it.

"Judge always had a whammy on us at their place and we finally broke through and got rid of the whammy," said Juan Diego coach **Sonny Tangaro**.

That was the signature game in Juan Diego's 12-10 season. Although it wasn't the Soaring Eagle's best record, this year was probably the closest the team had come to winning a 3A state basketball championship.

"We played a tough preseason schedule. We played our best basketball in the first round of league," said Tangaro, whose team opened the region season with five straight wins. "Then, I think our kids got satisfied."

The second part of the



Juan Diego celebrates its biggest win of the season, a victory over rival Judge Memorial, which marked the first time it had won on Judge's home court.

region ended with just two wins out of five, and the Soaring Eagle finished with a 7-3 region record. That was still good enough for second place but, after the solid start, the team had higher goals.

Juan Diego advanced to the 3A state tournament, defeated Richfield in its first-round game, but then lost to Hurricane and Morgan in games played at Utah Valley University.

"Once we beat Richfield, I thought we had a chance (to win it all)," Tangaro said. "Hurricane had a lot of

motivation against us (losing the 3A football title game), and we played at 9:30 a.m. They were ready; we weren't."

Still, that couldn't totally dampen all that Juan Diego had accomplished.

The Soaring Eagle started practices still missing 14 of 24 players, who played on the school's championship team and couldn't join until late November. Juan Diego opened the season Dec. 1 against 4A power Lehi and lost by just 55-48, despite being

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severely outmanned.

The non-region schedule included games against 5A powers Bingham, Lone Peak and Skyline. The team also battled hard at a Christmastime tournament in Logan, winning one of three games.

Juan Diego rallied behind senior **Ajay Pizza**, a four-year starter who led the team in scoring at 15.0 points per game. His confidence, playmaking ability and leadership kept the team on track until the football players joined the team, and got enough practice to start making a difference.

And they did.

* - Center **Trever McFalls** provided a big body inside and became a factor with his scoring and rebounding. McFalls will probably have greater memories of his football career (which included two state titles), but his ability to match up against an opponent's biggest player was a big help.

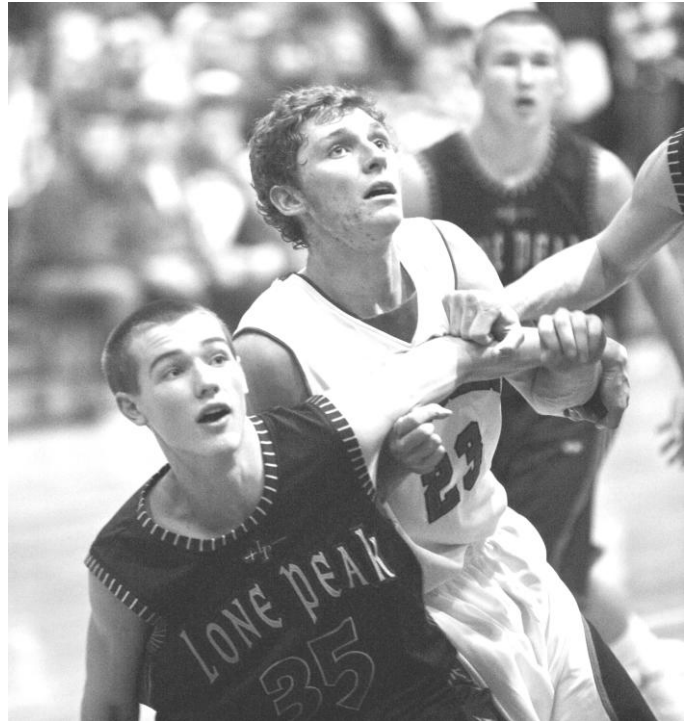
* - **Mark Krueger** joined the team late, and then sat out three weeks after having surgery. He later helped the team develop balanced scoring. Krueger finished at 6.5 ppg and gave the team an added punch. He had a season-high 20 points at Morgan, which help the team needed that night.

* - **Logan Mortensen** was a big scorer early, and led the team in three-pointers. Mortensen's play prevented opponents from constant double teams on Pizza early in the year.

* - Forward **Jalin Ames** averaged just 2.0 ppg, but provided a spark several times. He was a big factor in the Soaring Eagle's playoff win against Richfield. Tangaro praised Curran and called the team's most improved player.

Pizza was his normal self, scoring in double figures more than 80 percent of the time and was clearly the biggest factor in the Judge win. He had a season-high 25 against Layton Christian, and did everything he could so the team didn't go quietly in the state tournament.

"Pizza is a Division 1 player," Tangaro said. "This year we moved Pizza to a "2" (guard) position, and that was a better place for him."



Juan Diego's offense relied on the scoring ability of senior Ajay Pizza, who was named to the all-region team.

Besides being the top scorer, he also was able to hit three-pointers at key times.

Pizza was helped by sophomore point guard **Morgan Hesleph**. While sometimes inconsistent, Hesleph always played great defense and harassed opposing players. He led the team in steals and forced opponents to always prepare for him.

Tangaro also praised the efforts of senior **James Russell-Field**. A four-year player, Russell-Field showed an ability to motivate his teammates, and was a big factor through the season.

"He started the first five games because we had so many players in football," Tangaro said. "When we lost his starting job, he didn't complain. He did the best he could, and did whatever he could to help his teammates."

Players like Pizza, McFalls and Russell-Field will be missed next year, but the team is expected to return contributors like Hesleph, Mortensen, Krueger, Ames, **Brian Curran** and more. That should be enough to compete with Judge (again) and contend for the region title.