

# New role, no problem

SLEEPY EYE — She may not have shown up at the top of box scores in the scoring department the last two seasons, but Sleepy Eye St. Mary's senior Natalie Fischer showed up in more ways than one for her team.

The senior did her share of scoring earlier on in her varsity career, which started when she was an eighth-grader, and her efforts saw her pass 1,000 career points last season and cap her career with 1,493 points.

Most importantly, though, she finished her basketball career by helping the school win its first-ever Class A State Girls Basketball Tournament championship as the Knights defeated the top-ranked and top-seeded Mountain Iron-Buhl in the state finals on March 14 at Williams Arena.

Putting points on the board is fun, but Fischer wasn't asked to be a go-to scorer the past two seasons as the young Knights continued to develop and get points from more options.

No problem for Fischer, though.

"In my eighth-grade year, I knew my role was to be a shooter," Fischer said. "Playing with Maddie Mathiowetz and having her be at that Division 1 level now is just awesome for her and crazy to see how time flies, but I knew freshman year and sophomore year, I really did have to be kind of a scoring threat and be kind of Morgan's go-to.

"Then I knew my junior and senior year that I really needed to step up and be a leader knowing that other people behind me and the underclassmen were going to step up and score. Recalling my role with Mr. Woitas and my other coaches, he was like, 'You've got to be a leader, we need that vocal presence on the court and kind of that hype woman.'"

Fischer was never afraid to hype her teammates up, but she did much more than that.

While her scoring dipped to 5.9 points per game her senior year, Fischer was still a threat to knock down big shots on more than one occasion and was never a player teams could leave open. Her leadership and ability to hit shots in key moments, like she did several times in this year's playoffs and state tournament, was big for the Knights.

"First off, one of our seniors and the leadership she took on this year to replace what we lost from Amelia [Schwartz] from a year ago is just superb," Knights head coach Bruce Woitas said of Fischer. "Maybe didn't get as many opportunities offensively the way things went, but I tell you, down the stretch, she hit numerous big shots for us that were key in the games that we played, so that's just a credit to her

senior leadership and the experience that she's had playing varsity basketball basically since she got some time as an eighth-grader."

As junior guard Morgan Mathiowetz continued to lead the Knights in many areas this season, especially in the scoring column, sophomore Olivia Schieffert also took another all-around step forward this season, along with juniors Brynne Ibberson, Taylor Mathiowetz and Sydney Tauer. The Knights also got Kylie Pelzel back from injury this season, another player who could score in bunches when called upon, and they even saw eighth-grader Audra Hoffmann's role expand as the season went on.

With more scoring options, Fischer said she wanted to step up in other ways and worked on developing her passing also.

"I knew I really wanted to step it up in another category, and I think I did actually do pretty well in the assist category," Fischer said. "I wanted to get the best players the ball and be able to move the ball and have good offense. So I knew right away that I could be a leader, but I could also step up in those other statistics and help them out if it wasn't just scoring."

After the Knights made the state tournament last year and finished fourth, this year they got the job done. Fischer said the team was 100% more comfortable this season at state and it helped them match up against some very good teams.

Two of those teams the Knights saw in the regular season in Mayer Lutheran and Central Minnesota Christian. The Knights defeated Mayer Lutheran in the regular season and then in the state quarterfinals 72-57 and then moved on to the state semifinals to rematch CMC, the only team to defeat the Knights this season.

In the state semifinals, the Knights avenged their only loss by beating CMC 53-47 to move on to the state championship game against Mountain Iron-Buhl, a commanding 80-63 win that saw the season end with a state title and a 32-1 record.

"It was way more comforting knowing that we've played quite a few teams here and that we could hold our own with each and every single one of them," Fischer said. "A lot more easing this time around."

Fischer's basketball career officially ended with a high school state title and it's not a bad way to go out. She plans to attend the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul and study biology, with goals to eventually become a chiropractor.

"It was the end of my [basketball] career last week and it was extremely bittersweet," Fischer said. "But I'm also ready for the next step. I'm ready to grow and see what my future holds."

Fischer added that she was thankful for her time at St. Mary's and appreciated the support she got from her family, friends and teammates along the way.

"I would like to thank my family and friends," Fischer said. "Absolutely none of this is possible without them and their sacrifices that they make just so I can play this sport and do it with my best friends. I want to thank my teammates. They're just one of the greatest blessings in my life and it's so rewarding to have a state championship under your belt with these girls."