

GIRLS BASKETBALL CLASS 1A CHAMPIONSHIP

DOGGED DETERMINATION

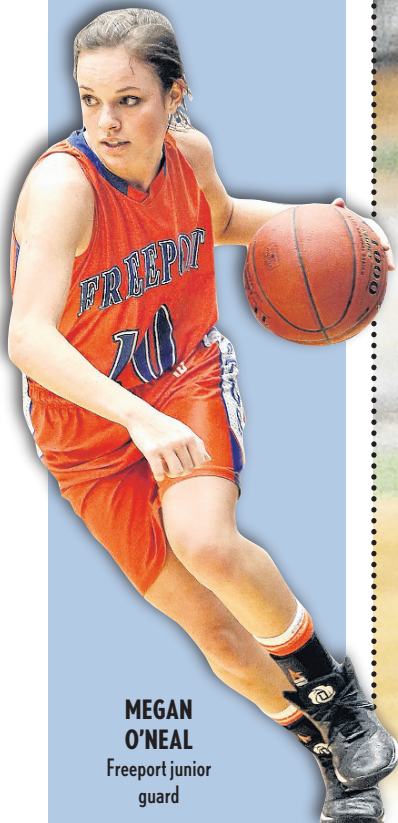
KEYS TO THE BULLDOGS' TITLE

MVP goes to ...

Freeport's zone defense. Devany Beard limited Kari Niblack to just 12 points, the team-high for a Wildcats offense that shot just 31 percent from the floor, made it to the line only seven times and coughed up 22 turnovers. Their bread-and-butter post game taken away, the Wildcats' 2-for-12 effort from beyond the arc and lack of aggression contributed to their second-lowest scoring output of the season.

Overarching theme

... Upperclassmen. Freeport had loads of them, Wildwood didn't. Seniors Katie O'Neal, Mary Kate Myrick and Laura Ham finished their prep careers on a winning note, while junior Megan O'Neal got her name even further out there for college recruiters. The quartet combined for 44 of Freeport's 46 points. Wildwood, meanwhile, received just four points from its lone senior, the other 32 coming from underclassmen.



MEGAN O'NEAL
Freeport junior guard

It was over when ... Laura Ham knocked down a pair of free throws with 1:19 left to give Freeport a 42-34 lead. A defensive stop later, a celebration decades in the making could begin.

MVP of the final four ... Katie O'Neal. The senior bound for the University of West Florida combined for 46 points, 10 rebounds and five 3-pointers in the two wins. She put the Bulldogs on her back at pivotal moments of both wins, fearlessly attacking the rim. More times than not she either finished, was fouled, dished out an assist or created room for a teammate to score on an easy putback. Her ability to handle pressure was also the key contributor to Freeport combining for just 21 turnovers in the two wins.



Right, Freeport's Devany Beard and Wildwood's Jacarria West fight for the ball during the Class 1A championship game on Thursday in Lakeland. **Top,** Freeport's Katie O'Neal is tripped by Wildwood's Toni Zito.

Photos by **PIERRE DUCHARME** | The Lakeland Ledger



Defense and clutch shots lift Freeport to first state title

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LAKELAND — Dogpiles formed and hugs lingered.

Sisters embraced. A father and daughter shared a moment in front of the bench, as did best friends at midcourt.

Tears, lots of them, poured out Thursday onto the 1A state finals hardwood at The Lakeland Center, which echoed the anthems of Queen, Creed and The Script.

Meanwhile the scoreboard flashed double zeros, below that a tally for the annals of Bulldog lore: Freeport 46, Wildwood 36.

The Bulldogs — giant killers and 3-point assassins — had earned the right to be called the Sunshine State's best.

And the pent-up emotions — the weight of a girls basketball program that'd never won a state championship along with the weight of a high school that hadn't won a team state title since the girls track team did it way back in 1986 — bled onto the hardwood.

Cue the celebration of a lifetime — long overdue.

After all, until the life-defining moment Freeport's celebrations had been muted.

The day before, Kool & The Gang's "Celebration" blasted over the loud speakers after its semifinal rout of Paxton.

Freeport formed a tight circle, the players' jumps synced with the beat. The moment was brief, the

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WILDWOOD 36



BOBCATS AT TIGERS

7 TONIGHT IN REGION 1-1A CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

BOYS BASKETBALL

Paxton, Malone meet again, this time for region crown

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It would be easy to assume that at 7 tonight, the Paxton boys basketball team will get exactly what it most desperately wants: A rematch with Malone, the squad that stunned

the Bobcats to take the district title and the only team in Florida to beat them all season.

Paxton had won the first two matchups, the latter by a gaping margin of 28 points.

And then, in the one that mattered most, when Paxton was essentially playing a home game

at the "neutral site" of Laurel Hill, the Tigers pressed the Bobcats into foul trouble and jumped all over them, stealing away with the district championship and rights to home court in the playoffs.

"Sometimes," Paxton coach Jeff Bradley warned on Wednesday afternoon, "you gotta be care-

ful what you wish for. They're very talented, very athletic."

The third time the Bobcats played Malone, foul trouble kept two of Bradley's best players, Zach Varnum and Desmond Moore, off the court for the majority of the game.

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