Yuba College basketball opens playoff run against Cabrillo

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The Yuba College men’s basketball team did its part in the regular season to secure a home playoff game — now it’s time for the second season to begin.

After going 21-5 and winning their eighth consecutive Bay Valley Conference title, the 49ers begin their quest for a state championship when they welcome in Cabrillo College of Aptos tonight in the opening round of the California Community College Men’s Basketball Northern California Regional tournament.

Despite losing its regular season finale to Merritt a week ago, Yuba still managed to lock up the No. 3 seed in the tournament and will host a No. 12-seeded Seahawks squad that finished 18-6 and won the southern division of the Coast Conference.

The 49ers have never lost a home playoff game during Doug Cornelius’ 13-year tenure leading the program, and the veteran coach is looking forward to another large crowd and a solid effort from his team tonight to keep that streak intact.

“It’s league champ versus league champ, so there’s no gimme. Every team that’s here deserves to be here,” Cornelius said. “A couple years ago when we made our run to the state title game, we had the community supporting us and I hope we have that again. There’s no question, our crowd can be a factor. People aren’t used to seeing what they see in our building … that place rocks.”

Yuba has been led all year by the sensational play of 6-foot-4 sophomore guard Chris Smith, a Utah State signee, who leads the team with an average of 21.3 points per game while shooting nearly 55 percent from the field.

Freshman guard Barry Opoku has slashed his way to an average of 12.6 points per game, and four other players — forwards Jayson Williams and Floyd Wornum, point guard Darrin Pfeffer Jr. and guard Desmond Butler — each average more than eight points per game for the Niners.

Cabrillo will counter with a high-scoring guard of its own in freshman Warren Jackson, the Coast Conference MVP and a first-team all-state pick, who is averaging 17.4 points per game.

“Obviously, they have some nice pieces around him. They have some shooters and they have some size inside,” Cornelius said. “We’ve been really good at outsizing people, but if we don’t come out defensive-minded, it’s going to be a short playoff for us. We’ve got to find a way to slow people down.”

And while Yuba’s average of 82 points per game ranks as the fourth-highest in the state, Cornelius knows the scoring won’t come easily when the ball is tipped off today at 7 p.m.

“If you look at the stats, they’re holding teams to 15 points less than their season average so it’s going to be a grind for us,” he said.

Should the 49ers win, they will play the winner of Saturday’s game between No. 4 Chabot and No. 14 Siskiyous on March 5.