

The Living Room Times

Girls Basketball Special

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7th LR Times "Girls
Basketball Special"

Knights get the last word — for now

In front of near-capacity crowd, #1 Southington defeats #5 Newington with late run; multiple rematches possible

On one side was the tumultuous multitude of Newington faithful, screaming "Defense! Defense!" as they pounded on the bleachers with all their collective might.

On the other side was a huge group of visiting Southington fans, loud enough to pass themselves off as a noisy home crowd, yelling "Let's go Southington!" at the top of their lungs.

Above it all, the scoreboard: Home 51, Visitors 51. One minute left.

Below it all, center stage: The greatest rivals in Connecticut girls basketball were playing a game for the ages, and their thrilling emotional battle was coming to a

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Left:
Lisa Marinelli penetrates through the Newington defense. Marinelli would later hit Southington's game-winning shot.

Below left:
Ela Lapciuk scores two of her game-high 26 points.

Below right:
Newington fans Danny Seguro and Marco Villalobos cheer for Lapciuk and the Indians.



The rivalry goes on

Newington vs. Southington:
1996-1997 season

First meeting:

Tuesday, February 5
Southington 55, Newington 51

Second meeting:

Thursday, February 20
Newington vs. Southington
at Southington High, 7:00 PM

Third meeting?

Between February 24 and 28
CCC Tournament: They could meet in the league playoffs

Fourth meeting?

Early- or mid-March
Class LL Tournament: They could meet in the state playoffs, maybe even in state semifinal or final

Indians on the road at New Britain today

#5 Newington at
#15 New Britain
Tonight
JV-5:45 Varsity-7:15

After a six-game homestand which lasted more than three weeks and was interrupted by a road game only once, the Newington girls basketball Indians are on the road again today, traveling to New Britain to

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Players of the Week for Varsity and JV

VARSITY

Veronique Fort



In Coach Pilz's words: "I've been trying to tell her all year that I feel that, if she just plays in the varsity games like she does in the JV games, she would be very

successful in varsity games, but in her head, she allows the awe of the varsity game to affect her negatively. She holds back, and she gets nervous. And finally—She's such a sweet kid, and such a wonderful person, and she works so hard, it's very hard to get angry at her—but finally, I yelled at her. And the results were tremendous. I kind of went after her and said, 'You can do this like anyone else. You choose to allow yourself to be intimidated! And I'm fed up with all this wonderful talent being wasted. Now, you go to the hoop and do it!' ... and she did! And lately, when she's been getting

into varsity games, she's playing with confidence! And that could be a great factor for us later on in the year, because if she starts getting confidence in herself, then I'm going to get [confidence] in her, and use her in crucial situations. Because God knows, she's capable. So, yeah, she's really made a turnaround the last three games, and I'm very excited about it."

JUNIOR VARSITY

Felicia Brown
Natalie Chavez
Kim Pina

Dangerous New Britain team hosts Indians Hurricanes fresh off upset of then-#1 Southington

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play a dangerous Hurricanes team which stunned top-ranked Southington last week.

By beating Southington, New Britain helped Newington in several ways. First, the Indians now have a chance to be outright league champions. If they win all of their remaining games, including the season finale at Southington, the Indians will be CCC South champions. Also, Newington Coach Sandy Pilz said, the Southington loss will work to Newington's advantage in the next Indians/Knights game, "because next time they come in against us, they won't come in with so much confidence."

But will New Britain's big win over Southington cause them to come in on an emotional high, helping them, or will they be overconfident and suffer a letdown, helping Newington?

"They could do one of two things," Pilz said. "They could be so high and pumped-up and believing in themselves that they play out of their minds, or they could suddenly feel pressure like, 'Oh no, we're expected to win because we beat Southington by 22,' and the pressure could make them play poorly. I don't know which New Britain is going to come out. I'm very curious to see."

Asked about his planned strategy as he prepared for New Britain, Pilz replied, "I'm going to focus totally on defense, because I'm not worried, because I believe that

the way we're playing offense right now, no matter what they throw against us, our kids will be able to react. Our best offense might be no offense, to just say, 'Go ahead and react to what they do.' It's defense [that] I want to focus on, and I want to keep them off-guard. I want to start with something that I think they won't expect, and as soon as they're starting to adjust to it, switch to something else."

"I can't wait," Pilz added.

On Thursday, Newington will play an away game at another extremely tough conference foe, Bristol Eastern.

"I've had so many people come up to me, saying that they think that we're not going to beat Eastern on Thursday. So many people think we're going to beat New Britain, and then have a letdown two days later."

Pilz paused, then added, "It would be *wonderful* if we could pull off two wins this week. That would be one of the biggest weeks in Newington High School girls basketball history, if we could pull off two wins this week."

"Do you think that we will?" asked *Living Room Times* editor Brendan Loy.

"Let's take them one at a time," Pilz responded diplomatically. "I think it's going to be a very hard-fought game [today against New Britain]. I'm coming in with a radical game plan, and we'll see what happens."

Marinelli lifts Knights in thriller

Newington loses, prepares for possible rematches

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head as Southington took the ball down the court, preparing to set up a final play and take a final shot at victory.

The Newington Indians, ranked #5 in the state, and the Southington Knights, ranked #1, had spent the previous 47 minutes of basketball trying to prove that “Anything you can do, I can do better.” The pumped-up players had one-upped each other time and time again, to the delight of the pumped-up crowd.

But as Southington’s Megan Burava dribbled the ball down the court, and NHS announcer Steve Ludlow declared “One minute remaining in the ballgame,” those previous 47 minutes of non-stop action basically went out the window. The 60 seconds that remained would determine the storyline of the latest chapter in Connecticut girls basketball’s greatest rivalry.

“I knew the first 30 seconds of that minute was wasted time,” Newington coach Sandy Pilz said after the game. “Because we weren’t going to come out after them, and they weren’t going to attack the basket. We were going to come out at thirty seconds.”

Southington’s plan was to hold the ball for as long as reasonably possible, then run a play and score with only a few seconds remaining so they would have the lead and Newington wouldn’t have enough time for a final shot.

To prevent that from happening, the Indians planned to attack the Knights when the clock reached 30 seconds. If Newington’s defense couldn’t get a steal, they could at least force Southington to take an unwanted shot with a good deal of time still remaining.

“I didn’t want to come out [and attack] with a minute to go, let them come right out and score, and be behind,” Pilz said. “And I didn’t want to just hold and play good defense, because then we can’t win. The most we can do is tie [and send the game to overtime]. I wanted to attack

them at 30 seconds, forcing them into shooting something under pressure and still having time when they scored.”

The Indians executed Pilz’s plan perfectly. When the clock reached 30 seconds, the defense assault began. Ela Lapciuk rifled out of her defensive position to try to pick off a pass from Megan Burava to Jen Gombotz. Gombotz held off Lapciuk, grabbing the ball and passing it to Lisa Marinelli, who quickly flipped it to Burava. As Burava decided what to do next—she probably would have liked to just hold the ball for another five or ten seconds—Kim Milardo charged out, reaching for a steal. Burava held on, and with Milardo



Above: With the game tied and the crowd in an uproar, Megan Burava dribbles the ball downcourt for the top-ranked Southington Knights.



Above: Kim Milardo tries to steal the ball from Megan Burava.

out of her way, she penetrated into the paint, then passed the ball back to Marinelli. Marinelli dribbled around Kate Strong, and then, before Milardo or Leslie Carlson could get close enough for a block, shot the ball with 15 seconds left.

Lisa Marinelli’s shot fell. Southington had the lead. The visitors side of the crowd went crazy.

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Right: Lisa Marinelli hits what turned out to be the game-winning shot for Southington with 15 seconds remaining.



Indians can't quite pull it out

Against Southington, Newington's final shot falls short

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But a Knights victory was not yet certain. Pilz's plan had worked. Because when the Indians called timeout to set up *their* final play, ten seconds remained on the clock—plenty of time to get off a good shot.

Pilz later related what he had told the team during that timeout with 0:10 to go: "What I said was, 'Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. Joanna Lynn nailed these guys four years ago in this game with a three-pointer, and that's what we're going to do.' I said, 'Ela, they're going to be so worried about you, you're going to take the ball, and you're going to penetrate right to the middle. Kate, you start in the corner in a 1-4, then pop up to the point. If she's open, Ela, nail it back to her. Kate, nail the three, you're going to be a hero. If you're covered, just keep curling into the middle. At that point, Ela, you either hit her on the curl, or draw a foul, or...find someone else who's open.'"

Pilz said that Southington expected a three-pointer, so they overplayed the perimeter, allowing Kate Strong to curl inside. "She curled in, wide open, and got the ball, and we had a nice 12-foot shot."

But Strong's shot just didn't fall. "It almost did!" said Pilz. "When it left her hands, I thought it was in. Just a *tad* too much backspin, but it was a heck of a look. Kate did a great job; I'm very proud of her for getting open and getting a good look like that. I thought it was very impressive."

"We *did* design a nice last play, and get a clean look. It just wasn't meant to be," Pilz said.

With the score still 53-51 Southington and one second left, Megan Burava grabbed the rebound and was fouled under the basket. On the Knights bench, the celebration began. On the Indians side, it was time to start thinking about the *next* Newington/Southington matchup. Burava hit both free throws, and Southington won, 55-51.

For Newington, the loss hurt, of course. The Indians had lost to their archrival, and even though that rival was the #1 team in the state, Newington's goal was never to

earn a close loss. A few days before the game, Pilz had said that he considered Southington the underdog. After all, the Knights were missing their second-best player—Colleen Klopp, sidelined due to injury—and the game was in the Indians' gym.

"I was surprised Southington played as well as they did," Pilz stated. "I didn't think that they—I *still* don't think they're as good as they played. I think they played way above their heads. I think they made some incredible under-pressure shots, and I think they're shooting percentage was very high. They surprised me the whole game." At halftime, Pilz said he told the team, "They're better than I thought they were, but we're still better than them, and we can't be satisfied with playing close and losing a close game. We have to win this game. We're better than them. We should. And it's our gym. This is important, and we can't let up."

In the end, Newington *did* play close and lose a close game. But they did *not* let up. Neither team did that.

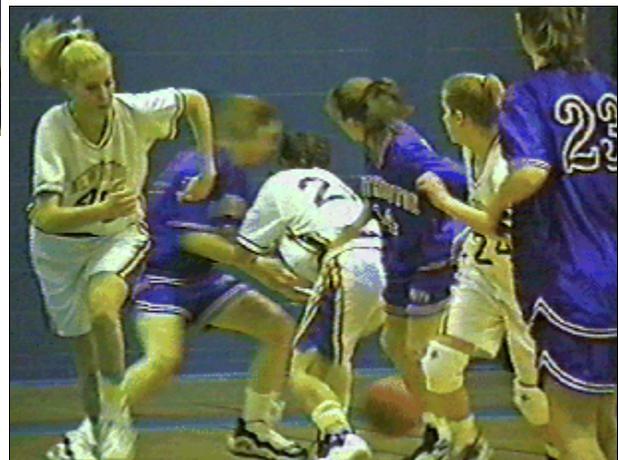
At the start of the game, emotions ran high. And consequently, early on, scoring ran low. In this battle of two of the best teams in the state, with two of the most prolific scorers in the state—Jen Gombotz and Ela Lapciuk—the first two minutes featured three jump balls, three traveling calls, a steal, a crazy play with multiple turnovers, and no points by either team.

Asked whether he thought the early scoring drought was caused by nervousness or good defense, Coach Pilz replied, "I don't think it was nerves this time, like it was

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Above: With five seconds left, Kate Strong takes a shot that would have tied the game for Newington. But the ball hit the front of the rim, Southington got the rebound, and the Indians lost a thriller, 55-51.



Above: Nobody could figure out which direction they were supposed to be going as the ball rolled from one player's hands to another to another during this crazy play in the game's first minute. In the end, the officials called a jump ball, and possession went to Southington.

Intensity the name of the game

Fans see thrilling contest as Knights pull out win

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against Masuk [on December 28, when the game started with lots of turnovers]....And I don't know if the word I'd use would be defense. I would call it intensity. Both offensive and defensive intensity. It was just *energy*. There was so much *energy* that nobody had a chance to do anything because nobody would let anybody do anything."

Eventually, of course, both teams figured out how to score. Newington led 10-9 at the end of the first quarter.

Right:
Newington defenders Ela Lapciuk and Kathleen Burdelski force Southington's Megan Burava to the sideline. Burava rolled the ball off of Lapciuk's foot and out of bounds, giving possession back to Southington.



At halftime, Southington had taken a 25-24 advantage, which they maintained in the third quarter so that they led 40-39 heading into the fourth.

"We didn't play poorly," Pilz said. "I thought we played better in this game than we did against Bristol Eastern [a 51-47 win]."

With just under three minutes to go, Southington held a 47-46 lead. Time was starting to run out, and the



Above: The Newington bench reacts after Ela Lapciuk was fouled in the act of shooting a three-pointer, which she hit. The four-point play gave the Indians a three-point lead early in the second quarter.



Above: Kim Milardo hits a long two-pointer from the perimeter to bring Newington within one at the beginning of the fourth quarter. In the background is the near-capacity crowd at the NHS gym.

Indians needed a big play.

Kate Strong delivered. With 2:34 on the clock, Strong nailed a huge three-pointer from the top of the key, putting Newington ahead by two, 49-47.

Moments later, Ela Lapciuk was fouled, sending her to the foul line to try to expand Newington's lead. Lapciuk delivered on both free throws, giving the Indians a 51-47 lead with 2:18 left.

"That was critical moment of the game," Pilz said. "I had a decision to make. I have two timeouts left. Do I use a timeout to

try to set up a delay game to get us to the foul line and pull away? And we had been 16 for 18 from the foul line, which was 88 percent. But then, on the other side of the coin was, if I use that timeout, then [Southington] has a chance to set up the 1-2-1-1 zone trap, which was the death of us the past two years. Whenever we made a close run, they'd set that up and the game was over. And I didn't want to give them a chance to set that up. So I didn't call a timeout. And that was the critical mistake."

"Had I called that timeout, we would have won," Pilz declared dramatically. "Rather than doing what was best

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Above: Newington's Ela Lapciuk hits the second of two free throws, giving Newington a 51-47 lead with 2:18 remaining in the game.

Southington finishes on top, at least for now

Rematch at Southington on February 20, two more possible in postseason

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for our team, I dictated my decision based on trying to prevent [Southington] from doing what was best for *their* team. I should have just let them do what they wanted, and focused on our team. I wish I had.”

Asked to say what makes him think that the benefits of calling the timeout would have outweighed the possible negative consequences of allowing them to set up the zone trap, Pilz responded, “The fact that, in the next minute, they scored [eight] points and we scored none.”

The first two of those eight final points were scored by Amanda Forcucci with 1:48 left. Then, 30 seconds later, came the turning point of the game: Kathleen Burdelski’s pass, intended for Kim Milardo, wound up in the hands of Jen Gombotz. After grabbing the steal, Gombotz went flying down the court for a 1-on-0 fast break, coasted in with the layup, and tied the game at 51-51.

“I saw that steal about ten times in my sleep that night,” Pilz said.

On the Indians possession that followed, Kim Milardo took a quick three-point shot which missed and went out of bounds. The play only took about ten seconds, and Southington would get to inbound the ball with

1:02 on the clock. Finally, Pilz called a timeout.

Asked if he thought Milardo’s three-pointer was too rushed, Pilz replied, “I blanked. I don’t even remember what happened. After Gombotz made the steal, did I call timeout?”

In fact, Pilz didn’t call timeout until *after* the Indians’ brief offensive play which followed Gombotz’s steal.

“Again, I should have called the timeout after Gombotz scored,” Pilz stated. “I missed it. I blew it! We should have brought it down then, and held to the end....When it was a tie game, we should have held onto the ball, and held on for the last shot; either win it in regulation or send it to overtime. I missed my opportunity.”

Asked for his assessment of the team’s play overall on Monday, Pilz replied, “Pretty good. Pretty good. I mean, I didn’t think we’d lose, but that doesn’t mean we played poorly. Southington ended up, for that game, anyway,

being better than I thought they were. But I still think that Southington played above their heads. I don’t think, without Colleen Klopp, they’re that good, and I don’t think they can maintain that level of play. They just played really well on that night.”

As for whether he expects Colleen Klopp to return to the Southington lineup by the end of the season, in time for future matchups against the Indians, Coach Pilz said, “I hope she’ll be back. I think she’ll be back. I hope she’ll be back. I’d rather lose to them with her than beat them without her. What I’d like to do is beat them with her. And I *do* think that’s possible.”

No one knows just what will happen the next few times Newington and Southington meet. But we can be sure of one thing: If last Monday’s game is any indication, the fans are anxious to see more of this great rivalry.

“I thought the size of the crowd was just fantastic,” Coach Pilz said of the fans who filled the NHS gym near capacity, “and I thought the crowd was very emotional, very into it. And I thought that both crowds [Newington and Southington fans] were provided with a really exciting game—all those lead changes, that’s just wonderful.”

Asked how the crowd support compared with previous Newington/Southington games at NHS, Pilz responded, “It had been progressively building years ago. Six years ago, we started to get some nice, nice crowds. And then five years ago, it got even bigger. And then four years ago, it was *unbelievable*. We sold out that game at the midpoint of the JV game, and had to turn people away.”

But, Pilz said, after Newington lost to Southington in the state championship game four years ago, “the fans went away. Two years ago, they started coming back a little bit; last year, there was a little bit more,” he stated, then added, chuckling, “It was almost like, this year, they had forgiven us for losing” the 1993 state title game. “It was like, they were back! It was like old times.”

In 1993, the Indians—then ranked #1 in the state—won both regular-season games against Southington, then lost to the Knights in the state championship game.

This year, Newington lost the first of the two regular-season games, but they may have as many as three more chances to topple the Knights before the season is over.

The first is a regular-season game, one which may turn out to be the determining game in choosing an outright CCC South champion. That matchup is next Thursday, February 20, at Southington High School at 7:15 PM.

After that will be the first-ever CCC Tournament, featuring the top teams from the CCC East, CCC West, and

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Above: After picking off a pass from Kathleen Burdelski to Kim Milardo (left), Jen Gombotz (right) runs down the court for the game-tying layup.

Indians/Knights '97 saga just beginning

One rematch guaranteed, two more possible

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CCC South. Newington and Southington will probably both qualify, and they could meet at some point in that tourney.

Then, of course, comes the state Class LL tournament, and potentially, the Newington/Southington matchup that *really* counts.

When Newington defeated Southington at home on a miracle last-second shot four years ago, Pilz said, "It looked like such a great thing, but then what ended up happening was, we lost in the [state] final because they

were hungrier than us. So, I feel that when Kate drove to the middle and missed that shot [last Monday], sure, at the time it was painful for Kate and painful for all of us, but the truth of the matter is, that might be the best miss we ever had. Because what may end up happening is, we may lose to them again [next Thursday], we may lose to them even in the league playoffs, but who knows, we may beat them in the states. We might just beat them. And that's the one that really, really counts."

"So, let's not fret over losses in February. Let's just gear up to be the best team we can be in March."

