

Christian Brothers wins CIF section title for ailing 'Coach J'

BY JOE DAVIDSON
jldavidson@sacbee.com

This is already an emotional lot, big on good cheer and celebrations after playoff victories and hard on themselves after crushing defeats.

On Friday night at Golden 1 Center, the Christian Brothers Falcons of Oak Park endured the gamut of feelings, from concern to motivation to elation.

Top seeded in the CIF Sacramento Section Division III boys basketball bracket, the Falcons held off 10th-seeded El Capitan of Merced 59-56, and then the

guys exhaled. This one was for their beloved coach who could not attend the game to lead his charge.

Jermaine Brown, in his fourth year heading the CB program, has battled health issues in the last year, suffering two minor strokes, his brother Mike Bolar told The Sacramento Bee inside Golden 1 Center, having flown in from Texas on Thursday night.

"He's going to be fine, and he's a lot better today than he was before," Bolar said. "His heart is here. I know he wants to be here."

Brown, 41, was hospitalized at Kaiser South in Sacramento



JOSE LUIS VILLEGAS jvillegas@sacbee.com

The Christian Brothers Falcons' Stephan Hewitt (13) shoots over El Capitan's Guerin Bliss (4) in the Division III championship on Friday.

early Wednesday morning, the day after his Falcons won a semifinal home game. He watched his team compete Friday on the streaming NFHS Network from his hospital room and kept in contact via cell-

phone with coaches.

"We played with a lot of passion and we kept the fire that Coach J brings, and the fire he instilled in all of us — the passion, grit and grind, the belief," said Shawn Underwood, a longtime

friend of Brown and assistant who served as interim coach Friday. "He told our guys to fight, to be strong, like he is. Our motto is 'All in and strong together.'"

Falcons players said they were inspired to impress their coach. Senior guard and team captain Daniel Powers scored 25 points and muscled in for 10 rebounds, and fellow fourth-year varsity player Stephan Hewitt contributed 19 points. Andre Rabb-Patterson had 8 points and made key defensive plays late, and another fourth-year player in Cameron Nero had seven rebounds.

MORE THAN JUST A COACH

Brown is more than just a coach to players. He's a shoulder to lean on, a father figure even for players with fathers.

"This means a lot for us to win this for Coach J," Hewitt said.

Said Nero, also a football

SEE CIF, 2B



JOSE LUIS VILLEGAS jvillegas@sacbee.com

Christian Brothers interim coach Shawn Jay holds up the section banner after his team defeated the El Capitan in the Sac-Joaquin Section Championship Division III championship on Friday. He was filling in for coach Jermaine Brown, who was hospitalized on Wednesday.

FROM PAGE 1B

CIF

starter on campus, “We are praying for him. This is bigger than basketball. We want him to get better.”

Brown grew up in Sacramento playing basketball, including at Burbank High School, where he graduated from in 2001. Brown attended TCU in Texas, played at Sacramento City College and spent time overseas as a civilian contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan to support American troops. In 2015, Brown got into coaching at his alma mater, learning from his mentor, Lindsey Ferrell, a 500-game winning coach at Burbank, and he took over the CB program before the 2022 season.

His best friend on campus is Christian Brothers girls coach Shandyn Foster. He has invited her to boys practices to teach them a play or two. The CB boys players did not attend Thursday night’s CB girls section championship game against Atwater so that they could be with their

coach instead, filling up his hospital room with promises to give it their all and stories to lighten the mood for Brown.

Brown hasn’t lost his zest to lead and coach, even confined to a hospital. He called Foster on Friday as she watched the CB boys game, “to relay messages to the team and then he got on a speaker phone call at halftime,” she said. The coach was able to FaceTime with his players after the game, both sides sharing smiles.

Foster said she appreciates how Brown led the boys team from a 6-21 season in 2022 to 15-15 in 2023 to a 19-14 team that reached the section D-III finals at Golden 1.

“I admire him so much as a coach,” Foster said. “He’s weathered so many storms at CB, so many doubters and naysayers. He started with an all-in motto. They bought in. He’s a good human. I am so proud of him. Of all the people, he deserves this moment with his team,

and it saddens me.”

Christian Brothers women’s athletic director Melissa Flowers said, “It’s been pretty emotional the last few days. Everyone has been heartfelt in their concern and support. He’s a great leader, a phenomenal mentor and builder of young men.”

Underwood, the interim coach, stressed to players this week that hoops dreams do come true. He knows because he lived it, having won a section D-I championship with Laguna Creek in 2004 under coach Jim Stephens, the same man who coached Christian Brothers to its previous to section crowns, doing so in 1999 and 2001.

Falcons players said their night will be complete with a return visit to the hospital, one of them saying, “We’re bringing the party to coach!”

Diego Ulteras scored 22 points and Elias Ruiz 10 for El Capitan, which pulled upsets along the way to reach its first section final.

Joe Davidson:
916-321-1280,
@SacBee_JoeD