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Niel Valmores (0) of Christian Brothers pumps her fist after giving the Falcons a four-point lead with 5.5 seconds to play Friday night.

Falcons won't be denied

BY BILL PATERSON
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Niel Valmores and Ana Burch have been through a lot together.

They've played basketball on the same team since the sixth grade, and they have been four-year players and senior leaders this season for Christian Brothers.

For the first three years, they saw their seasons end in disappointment in the Sac-Joaquin Section semifinals.

But when they made it to Friday's championship game at Sleep Train Arena, they were not going to be denied.

With Burch and Valmores playing their best at the end – and with a dominating all-around performance from junior teammate Alicia Gonzalez throughout – the top-seeded Falcons held off No. 2 Vanden 61-56 for the Division III title.

After Vanden tied the score 47-47 on Toni Taylor's two free throws with 4:05 to play,

THEIR COMBINATION OF YOUTH AND EXPERIENCE CLAIMS SCHOOL'S SECOND SECTION CHAMPIONSHIP

Burch, Valmores and Gonzalez hit consecutive baskets and then outbattled Vanden in the final two minutes.

"It took awhile to get used to the atmosphere and being here for the first time," said Valmores, who scored 15 points and committed only two turnovers against Vanden's fast and furious defensive pressure. "But I think in the fourth quarter we buckled down."

Burch, a 5-foot-5 scrapper, grabbed an amazing 12 rebounds and scored seven points while Gonzalez had a game-high 18 points and eight rebounds.

Mariah Williams led Vanden (27-4) with 17 points, Taylor had 16 and Kayla Blair seven points and 13 rebounds.

It was a wild and physical game with bodies flying and hitting the floor – something one might expect from two programs that had won one girls section basketball championship between them.

Both teams shuttled in players like a hockey line. The Falcons (24-7) played 12 and Vanden 11, so the pace was never slow. There were 51 turnovers and 44 fouls.

"I embrace physical, by the way," Burch said. "I'm so proud of my team and how far we've come."

It was Christian Brothers' second section title. The Falcons won a D-IV crown in 2008 in coach Ron Gully's first season.

The second one was pretty special for Gully because the

Falcons overcame several early injuries, especially the loss of Valmores. She missed seven games, five of them losses, because of a concussion.

Now with everyone healthy, Gully thinks his team can contend for CIF Northern California and state championships.

"These guys have a great balance of experience and youth," Gully said. "The seniors stepped up, and the young guns held their own."

Freshman post Dominique McNeely came through with a strong game (nine points and seven rebounds) before fouling out. Sophomore Kira McKechnie, who shares inside duties with McNeely, added five points and six rebounds.

CBS will find out Sunday who it will host in the first round of the NorCal playoffs.

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