



*2025 3A
Semifinalist*

ELC GIRLS BASKETBALL

a special section of the
★ **ESTHERVILLE NEWS**

Thursday, March 20, 2025



Estherville Lincoln Central's basketball seniors have plenty to be proud of this past season. They played their final game on March 6 at Wells Fargo Arena, losing 35-34 to eventual state champion Mount Vernon. Seniors from left are Julissa Smith (33), Hillary Ruschy (34), Haylee Stokes (23), Rylee Yager (20), and Cara Schiltz (3).

Photo by David Swartz

Unprecedented accomplishments for the CLASS OF 2025

Seniors post career record of 95-10

By DAVID SWARTZ

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Having the most decorated basketball player in school history in their class, has made the 2025 senior girls' players the most accomplished in school history.

Haylee Stokes has been a starter since she was a freshman, fellow senior Rylee Yager has been a three-year starter, fellow senior Hillary Ruschy has been a two-year starter while seniors Cara Schiltz and Julissa Smith both became regular starters this season.

Coach Don Martindale will tell anyone

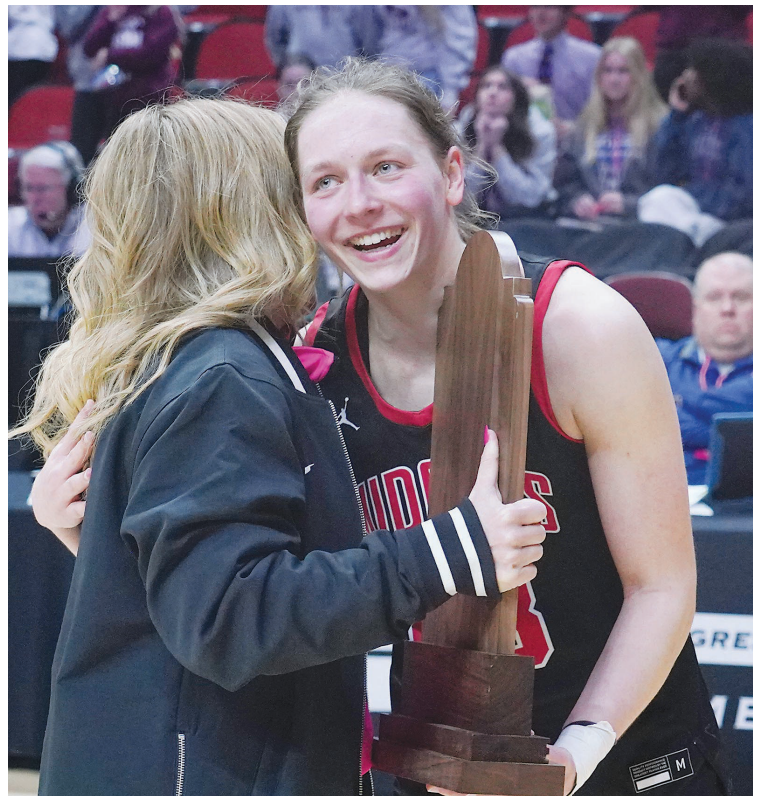
about what it has been like to work with this group for four years and that their character and work ethic go above and beyond on and off the court.

The coach has tallied some of their accomplishments as a group.

Over the past four years, the ELC girls have compiled a 95-10 record with a 52-2 record on the home court.

The two home losses were a 50-48 defeat at the hands of Central Lyon on Jan. 3, 2022. The other home loss was the first game of this season, a 44-34 loss to Roland-Story when Stokes was out with an ankle injury.

ELC has dominated the Lakes Conference, winning four straight league titles. The Midgets won 32 straight conference games



ELC's Haylee Stokes accepts the 3A semifinalist trophy.

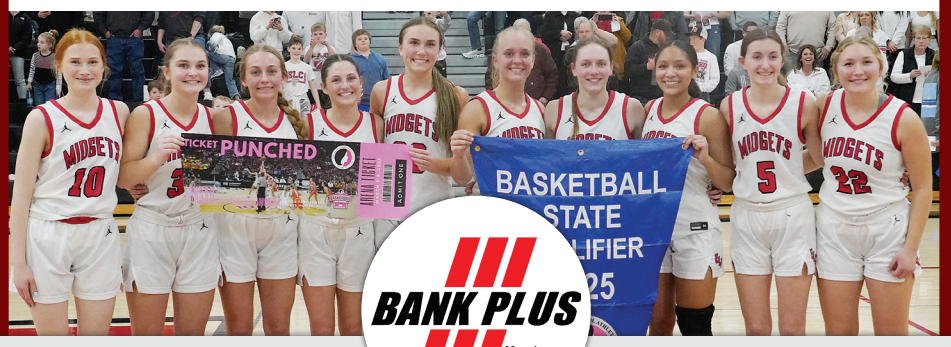
Photo by David Swartz

GREAT JOB GIRLS!

Your dedication, teamwork, and heart made this season unforgettable—congratulations on an incredible journey.



CONGRATS ELC GIRLS BASKETBALL TEAM ON AN OUTSTANDING SEASON!



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from 2021-25 before falling to Cherokee 50-44 this season. The seniors finish with a 33-1 conference record over the last four years.

Away from home court, ELC posted 43-8 including a 6-3 record in four years at the Class 3A State Tournament.

Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines is the venue they have played at second-most to their home court, with nine games there.

Off the court, the seniors have excelled academically also. Stokes, Schiltz, and Smith all have 4.0 grade point averages with Yager at 3.984 and Ruschy at 3.963.

"They are a very special group that has consistently represented the ELC Girls Basketball Program, and the ELC community in a first class manner these past four years," said Martindale. "They are a group of young ladies who have cared for one another, supported one another, played for one another and have appreciated each other's accomplishments far more than their own. It has been an honor and a privilege to coach them. They are certainly going to be missed. The future is very bright for all of them. We wish them nothing but the very best as they move on."



The Estherville Lincoln Central Girls Basketball Team wrapped up their fourth straight trip to the state tournament at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines with a Class 3A Semifinalist trophy. Front from left are Julissa Smith, Rylee Yager, Hillary Ruschy, Haylee Stokes, Cara Schiltz; second row: Emilia Tarnowski, Ariana Beekman, Zoey DeRuyter, Morgan Clabaugh, Grace Nath; back row: Coach Mitch Krein, Head Coach Don Martindale, and Coach Scott Stokes.

Photo by David Swartz




Congrats Midgets!

Congratulations on reaching the state tournament! That's a huge achievement and a testament to your hard work. We are so proud of you. Well done!




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PLAYER INTERVIEWS

Seniors enjoy time spent together

By DAVID SWARTZ

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Prior to the state tournament, I sat down to talk with the seniors of the Estherville Lincoln Central Girls Basketball Team.

Haylee Stokes, Rylee Yager, Hillary Ruschy, Cara Schiltz, and Julissa Smith have had quite a run.

One trait that often comes out in championship teams is enjoying the company of teammates. That's definitely true with this group as many of them have told me during my coverage over their careers.

Below is a glimpse into their time together along with a couple questions to junior Morgan Clabaugh, ELC's sixth player this season.

Haylee Stokes

David: Do you remember your first varsity basket and what memories stand out to you?

Haylee: I'm guessing my first basket was probably a layup, because my freshman year I did not shoot the 3-pointer often. Most of my memories just come from the time we have together."

David: Is there any game that stands out to you.

Haylee: Definitely Central Lyon last year. It was a really good game for me. I really couldn't miss that game. That's probably the best game. but there are so many games that I can't even remember."

David: You've obviously put in a lot of hard work over the years. Talk about that.

Haylee: I'd say I try to shoot at least once a day, then within practice as well as staying after and shooting. Yeah, it's just a lot of hard work, but I know that it takes a lot. My teammates also put in that much work too.

David: So, obviously, you enjoy your time on the basketball court.

Haylee: Definitely. Always coming to workouts is fun, and then practices are even more fun because you have someone to do it with, so being able to get through the harder stuff together is also really fun.

David: I've joked with people that when you get a steal in the backcourt, then you pass nearly the length of the court to Rylee or another teammate, that you're just too lazy to run the length of the court. You've been doing that well and your passes are usually right on target. I admire your skill.

Haylee: We've grown so much closer, and they (my teammates) figured out that if I get a hand on the ball, I'm more than likely to get it, and they know that if they run the floor that, that's the first thing I'm looking for is them up the floor.

David: From the first time I saw you on the court,



ELC's Rylee Yager launches a free throw against Mount Vernon.

Photo by David Swartz

your left hand layups have been seemed like they're smoother than your right hand.

Haylee: My dad's always made us do left-handed layups, and we would play games and practice when we were a little like making us throw with our left hand and dribble with our left hand, just knowing that that's a very important thing because a lot of kids can only use their right hands, so being able to go left already puts you at a big advantage.

David: Obviously your dad Scott has been a driving force behind your practices. How much has that meant for you to have him all around all the time?

Haylee: It definitely means a lot like he does so much for our team, but he's also had such a good high school and college group of teammates that he knew he wanted the best for us and has always pushed us to be our best. And we've had a great group of kids, too. So, it's just been really fun.

David: Obviously this group of seniors is a tight-knit group.



ELC's Cara Schiltz works to create space against Mount Vernon defender.

Photo by David Swartz

Haylee: Now, we're super close, and each year. It just has always been about our team success, and that's just been driven into us since we were little—knowing that the team comes first and putting the team first helps everyone be at their best.

Cara Schiltz

David: Do you remember your first varsity basket?

Cara: Oh yes, actually, I do remember my first varsity basket. I banked in a three-pointer, but I don't remember where it was at.

David: What do you feel your best game was?

I would say this last game at Spirit Lake. It was my highest scoring game, and it was really fun to be a part of. Also, I hit the winning shot at Newell- Fonda last year —that was pretty cool.

David: What other memories do you have from a game or practice?

Cara: I remember we were doing this shooting drill and I air-balled a shot, and then Jasey (Anderson) turned



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ELC's Rylee Yager, Cara Schiltz, and Julissa Smith surround a Mount Vernon player as the Midgets tried to rally against the Mustangs in this year's Class 3A State Semifinal in Des Moines.

Photo by David Swartz

around and chucked the ball at me, but it got stuck on the top of the backboard between the shot clock. Also hanging out doing our shooting drills—it's always so much fun.

David: How much work do you do in the off season? Do you do a lot on your own?

Cara: Well, in the summer, we always come in for about an hour—three times a week, maybe, and I try to get in the gym as much as I can just shooting on my own. But in the fall, we actually have a fall league thing that we do in Graettinger, and we just go and play scrimmages with different teams. Other memories are when we're at softball when we're all together and just the different memories of—I don't know—going to Woody's or our practices that we have together.

Rylee Yager

David: Do you remember your first varsity basket?

Rylee: I know that we were playing Manson and I just remember that I didn't think I was going to play, and then all of a sudden coach told me to go in. And I went in, and I know that I made a cool move, and I missed a wide open shot right away, but I don't remember my first basket. I know that it was in that game

David: What other memories do you have?

Rylee: My freshman year, we were playing Unity Christian in our second round game at State. And I just remember that Haylee wasn't feeling the best and I had to go in, so I played most that game. I remember that a ball went loose in the back court when we were playing defense, so I sprinted and I had the biggest smile on my face, and I just remember that our whole bench was laughing at me because I just had the biggest smile on my face, and the commentators were like making fun of me and stuff. It was just a cool memory to experience.

David: Anything else?

Rylee: Any time that we just spent together was obviously a good memory, but like going to hotels together. I think it was my junior year. We went down to Cedar Rapids, and we played Western Dubuque, and that was just a fun game. I guarded a D1 athlete, and I had never gotten to experience that before.

David: How does this time together translate to the basketball court?

Rylee: We've obviously created such a good bond

together, so it definitely helps knowing that we are each other's best friends when we go on the court. We can trust and rely on each other and know that we have each other's back.

Hillary Ruschy

David: Do you remember your first basket?

Hillary: I don't. It was obviously freshman year. It was probably just like a random wide open layup or something I don't know. I don't remember it though.

David: Is there any game that you remember playing really well?

Hillary: Probably any time that I think my shots fall, so I'd say Cherokee. I had a really good game—the game that we lost sadly, but I kept driving and shooting, and they were falling for me.

David: You had a good game against Humboldt.

Hillary: Yeah, it was, but it was just easy for Haley to pass in the ball to me, and I had a lot of like wide open layups, so I was kind of in the right place at the right time.

David: Are there any memories with your teammates on or off the court that stand out?



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There were plenty of hugs to go around as ELC's seniors wrapped up their careers at the state tournament. Coaches Don Martindale and Scott Stokes both have spent plenty of time with this group of girls in developing their defense and teamwork.

Photo by David Swartz

Hillary: I wouldn't say stand out, just like every day's a really fun day with my teammates. I look forward to practices and playing in games, being in locker room and bus rides. It's all just a good time, so nothing really sticks out to me just because it's always fun - especially since we've been together since, like at least third grade.

Julissa Smith

David: Do you remember your first basket or a game that you remember?
Julissa: I really enjoyed my game at, I think that home Spirit Lake game where they called the timeout right away. It (the atmosphere) was so energized.

David: How has it been getting close to this group of seniors.
Julissa: I think it's been a one-of-a-kind experience.

David: The other players have said they enjoy coming to practice. Do you feel the same?
Julissa: I do try to take it seriously, but it's also something I really look forward to. It's really fun.

David: Is there anything else you'd like to add?
Julissa: I just feel really lucky to be able to play with this group and be able to play for these coaches too.

Morgan Clabaugh

David: Do you remember your first varsity basket.
Morgan: It was my freshman year. I shot a three.

David: Is there another game or moment on the court that stands out to you?
Morgan: The last game when we earned the right to go to state, and then everyone came on the court.

David: What has it meant to you to practice with this group of seniors?
Morgan: They've taught me a lot. I mean, they've played together for a long time, and just playing with them has helped me improve everything in my game. My defense has improved a lot playing and they always encourage me.



ELC's Hillary Ruschy reconsiders driving to the basket after seeing Mount Vernon's 6-3 center Chloe Meester (20).



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RECORDS, RECORDS, AND MORE RECORDS

Stokes is driving force for ELC's four years of success

By DAVID SWARTZ

DSWARTZ@ESTHERVILLENEWS.NET

While it takes more than one player to make a basketball team, one player can make a huge difference.

From her first varsity game as a freshman in Manson on Tuesday, Nov. 23, 2021, Haylee Stokes has been the difference for the Estherville Lincoln Central girls program.

Yes, she has had some great teammates, four of whom have scored over 1,000 points in their career—2022 alumni Kaitlyn Tendal and Jaydan Nitchals, 2023 alum and sister Jordyn Stokes, and, most recently, fellow senior Rylee Yager.

But Haylee was the key component in the Midgets' run to the state title in 2022 as well as ELC's next three state appearances. Prior to Haylee's arrival, ELC's best run was three straight state appearances from 2011-13.

Now that her career has wrapped up, the 5-6 point guard owns 11 school records outright and is tied for a 12th.

While six of her school records deal with scoring, Haylee's complete game shows in her assist and steal records as well.

Scoring records

Haylee holds the school record for points in a game, in a season, and a career.

Haylee's 44-point effort in the 2024 3A quarterfinal game against Forest City is both a school record and 3A state tournament record.

She set the record for points in a season at 664 during her junior campaign.

Also as a junior, Haylee surpassed the previous school record for points in a career held by 2013 alum Allie Sievert. Sievert's point total was 1,294.

Haylee wraps up her career with 2,196 points, which also places her 15th all-time in state history.

Free throws and 3-pointers

From her first season, Haylee had a knack for getting to the free throw line and then making her shots when she gets there. In ELC's 2022 state tournament title run, Haylee was 29-of-34 from the line in three games at Wells Fargo Arena.

After shooting 84.8 percent (106-of-125) from the line this season, she finishes with a career free throw percentage of 79 percent—a school record for a career. However, 1999 alum Jessica Bebo still holds the record free throw percentage in a season when she shot 88 percent in the 1997-98 season.

While Haylee holds the record for 3-pointers made in a season after making 71 as a junior, Haylee didn't quite catch Jaydan Nitchals for 3-pointers made in a career. Nitchals holds the record with 190 while Haylee finishes her career with 184.

For 3-pointers made in a game, Haylee is tied with two former teammates. Haylee, Jordyn Stokes and Nitchals all have made seven treys in one game. Haylee accomplished the feat on Dec. 10, 2024



ELC's Haylee Stokes eyes her defender after launching a 3-pointer against Mount Vernon.

Photo by David Swartz

against Jackson County Central.

Assists and steals

Haylee's ability to find teammates racing ahead down court or wide open under the basket are legendary. Her best assist game came this season when she had 17 assists against Okoboji. Her record for assists in a season came during her junior year when she finished with 177.

Haylee had 145 assists in her senior season and finishes her career with a record 553 assists.

Haylee's ability to pick the pocket of an opposing guard or come up with an off-the-ball steal are just as legendary. Three times during her career, Haylee has had 10 steals in a game—the most recent came in the 3A state quarterfinal in ELC's 57-33 win over Cherokee. She first had 10 steals in a game during her freshman year when she accomplished the feat against Western Christian on Dec. 7, 2021. She also had 10 steals against Unity Christian on Feb. 14, 2024.

Her school record for steals in a season was set during her sophomore season when she had 144. She finishes her career with a record 503 steals.

While an ELC player might be able to top one of Haylee's records in the future, her name will be in the record books for a long time.

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ELC's 2025 schedule (21-4)

Roland-Story 44, ELC 34
ELC 66, Western Christian 22
Mount Vernon 52, ELC 42
ELC 53, Algona 26
ELC 64, Sioux Central 36
ELC 52, North Union 14
ELC 83, Jackson County 42
ELC 75, Okoboji 36
ELC 63, Newell-Fonda 52
ELC 52, Storm Lake 33
ELC 51, Central Lyon 44
ELC 51, Emmetsburg 38
ELC 41, Cherokee 34

ELC 71, Spencer 29
ELC 47, Spirit Lake 21
ELC 57, Storm Lake 54
ELC 65, Storm Lake 28
Cherokee 50, ELC 44
ELC 54, Spirit Lake 41
ELC 47, Emmetsburg 3
ELC 83, Eagle Grove 17
ELC 64, Humboldt 27
ELC 49, Hampton-Dumont-CAL 31
ELC 57, Cherokee 33
Mount Vernon 35, ELC 34



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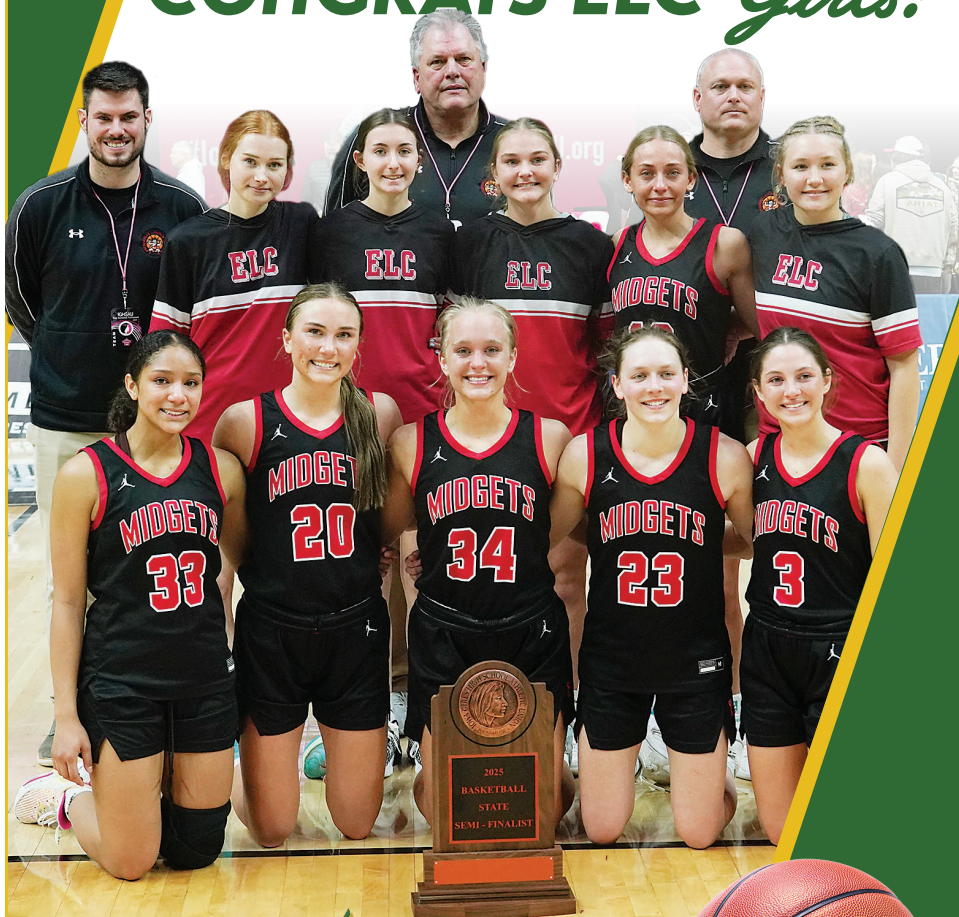


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