

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Crean Lutheran girls basketball team off to CIF finals for first time

By [TIM BURT](#)

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Crean Lutheran's girls basketball team is hoping to cap a memorable season with one more victory Saturday evening.

The Saints (18-10) will be making their first appearance in a CIF championship game when they take on Heritage Christian of Northridge (21-9) Saturday at 6 p.m. at Godinez High in the CIF 5AA title game.

"This is a little bit of a Cinderella team," said Crean Lutheran coach and Tustin resident Kelsi Walker, who is in her first year back coaching the Saints.

Walker was Crean Lutheran's first head coach in 2007 and led the Saints to their first CIF playoff appearance in 2009. She then took eight years off to raise her children, Landon, 8, and Kyla, 5.

Walker played at Foothill her first three years in high school before transferring to Woodbridge, where she was first team All-CIF, league MVP and all-county her senior season. Walker played college basketball at Point Loma Nazarene University then joined Eric Bangs staff at Woodbridge as an assistant coach for two years.

Now, she's back as head coach at Crean Lutheran and enjoying the Saints drive to the finals.

"They only won four games last year and it has taken them half of the season to start believing they could compete," Walker said. "As a coach, we always want our kids peaking at the end of the season. So it has been exciting to see that happening right now. They are playing with so much heart and determination.

"The girls fought hard to get a second place finish in the Academy league. Last year, they got second to last. There are a lot of good teams in our league (five teams went to the CIF playoffs)."

Many players have contributed for the Saints.

"My two seniors and captains, Kylie Needham and Erin Koymatsu, both received first team all-league," Walker said. "But it has been our freshman, Shannon O'Malley, who has really stepped up her confidence during the CIF playoffs and has helped lead our girls."

O'Malley, an Irvine resident, was named this week as OC Varsity player of the week. She has averaged 17 points a game in the CIF playoffs.

Crean Lutheran has also received solid contributions from Allison Reed, the sophomore starting point guard, who lives in Tustin.

Crean Lutheran advanced to the finals with a 46-40 victory over Westridge in the semifinals on Saturday night. O'Malley scored 15 points and Jennifer Mazzarini added 11 points for the Saints, who outscored Westridge, 11-8, in the final quarter.

"Our game strategy was to shut down Westridge's leading scorer," Walker said. "Our starting forward, Mason Busler did an excellent job slowing her down and holding her to only 13 points.

"We started the game on fire. Jennifer Mazzarini hit back to back 3-pointers to get us off to a great start. The nice thing about this team is that we have several players that can make a big impact in any given game, so it is probably hard to scout and guard us. And it makes is really fun to coach them."

Now, the team prepares for Saturday's big game against Heritage Christian.

"They are a really good team, probably 10-15 points better than us," Walker said. "They've got a great senior post player who has a deadly jump shot who averages 19 points a game. They also have a great sophomore guard. I'm hoping and trying to get my girls to believe and dream big. Anything is possible."

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