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{ Sports }

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## BOYS' BASKETBALL

# Learning to play as a team

■ Pine Crest players stepped up their production when star forward Ed Waite went down with an injury.

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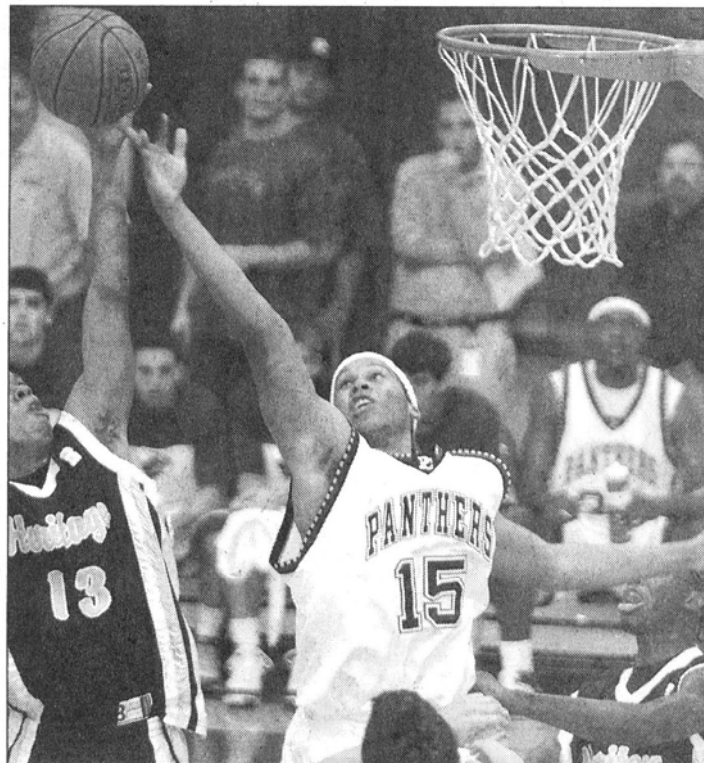
When star small forward Ed Waite sustained a knee injury and missed most of the 2006-07 season, Pine Crest basketball coach David Beckerman preached patience. Development of the talented core soon came, and the Panthers — behind star guard Brandon Knight — reached the Class 3A state semifinals.

Even though Waite returned for the start of this season, Beckerman's team again was forced to adjust when Knight missed the first half of the season after he underwent surgery to remove a cyst from his back.

Knight returned Jan. 8, and Pine Crest — winners of 18 consecutive overall — won all 16 games he played in this season. Pine Crest hopes to continue the run Wednesday, when it plays Marianna in a Class 3A semifinal at The Lakeland Center.

"I see great things," said senior center Jeff Pelage, whose team is 26-4. "Everyone is putting in the best effort that they can. . . . We all stick together. We always have each others' back on the court. We're always talking. We never leave anyone behind. Having Brandon back on the court was great."

The Panthers' four losses



TOM ERVIN/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

**COMEBACK:** Ed Waite has returned from a knee injury to help Pine Crest reach the state final four.

this season came by a combined 15 points. Their early success, while missing their star, provided confidence that postseason success would come.

"We were encouraged," Beckerman said. ". . . We were a little concerned about the chemistry. You have a player, and you miss him. But Brandon's the kind of player that he fits right in, and there's no problem at all."

Knight, a sophomore ranked second in the country

by rivals.com, quickly lived up to his billing. He had 38 points to defeat highly touted District 14-3A rival American Heritage in both the district final and regional semifinal. He enters the state semifinals averaging 20.5 points, eight rebounds and 7.5 assists.

"Brandon is a complete player," Beckerman said. ". . . Brandon Knight does more than just shoot. He plays defense. He gets assists. He gets his teammates involved. That's the mark of a great

player."

His absence, however, allowed the Panthers to emerge as a better team. Point guard Brandon Reese expanded his game, and eighth-grade guard Trey Henry earned meaningful minutes.

Players not used to carrying the offensive load adjusted their games.

"When we didn't have him, it was different because we were so used to him being there," Pelage said. "When times got rough in a game, he'd be there to shoot the ball. We got adjusted to that. We just started hitting the open man and gaining confidence in our team."

Pelage underwent a similar transformation a year earlier. Pelage, 6-8, rounded out his skills when Waite went down. Pelage was relied upon for his interior defense and rebounding, two traits that define his play this season.

"Ed is a great rebounder," Pelage said. "Me and him, we both go attack the boards. When he went down, I didn't have anyone else to rely on because I was so used to him having my back on scoring and us rebounding as a team. Since he got hurt, I felt like I had a lot on my shoulders as far as rebounding. I learned to rebound by myself, and I learned to create."

The Panthers will get to learn another lesson 2:30 p.m. Wednesday — whether they are prepared for a championship run.

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