

## **Monroe High Guard Ayisat Afolabi Is Shooting For A Fourth Straight City Finals Appearance And Siblings Zenab And Aliyyat Are Trying To Help Get Her There**



M. TERRY/SFVS

**In Triplicate** -- Sisters Aliyyat, Ayisat and Zenab Afolabi are mainstays on the Monroe High girls' basketball team.

It's the final day of the 2012 calendar year, and it's turning into a lousy Monday afternoon for the Monroe High girls' basketball team.

This is the fifth game in the six-day West Coast Holiday Festival Tournament, and Monroe is already in a deep 23-2 first quarter hole, put there by Playa Del Rey St. Bernard. As the game wears on, the score doesn't get much closer – 42-13 at the half, 56-21 after three quarters, and a final score of 58-26. It's a third straight loss for the Vikings, dropping their record to 8-4.

It's easy to rack this one up to tired legs and holiday disinterest, of having played too many tournament games crammed into the Christmas break like so many stars in a desert sky. It's also apparent this is not the same, seasoned grouping of Monroe players that have gone to three consecutive Los Angeles City Section finals, and won the Division III title in 2011. They look smaller, even frailer than their predecessors, at times unsure of what to do on the court.

Except for one player – senior guard Ayisat Afolabi. She may not play that well on this day – no one does for Monroe – but she has the bearing of someone used to winning. And she is emerging as one of City's best players, averaging almost 23 points per game. She's going to need help to reach the finals a fourth time. And it may come from her family. Sisters Zenab, a sophomore, and Aliyyat, a freshman, are playing on the Vikings this season. Both siblings are

averaging nearly seven points per game.

They wear uniform numbers 2, 3, and 4 on the court, and the pecking order seems established. Ayisat, 17, is the leader, Zenab, 15, is the occasional challenger, and Aliyyat, 14, is figuring where to best fit in, trying to get to where physical and emotional checkpoints her older sisters have already reached.

When asked how they compare, Ayisat said, "We're all different. I'm more reserved. She (pointing to Zenab) is more annoying. And (Aliyyat) talks too much." Then she starts laughing, and her sisters join in.

Ask Monroe Coach Quincy Brooks about coaching tres Afolabis on a daily basis and his smile is both wide and thoughtful.

"The challenge is they are actually sisters. One minute they're fighting with each other, next minute it's all love. Then you add on the fact they are so competitive with each other," Brooks said.

"In the beginning of the season there were challenges but since we have been going along, it's not so much an issue now."

What helps, Brooks said, is Ayisat is not only the alpha female among the sisters; she is the captain of the team. "She is the voice of reason. She does a good job of keeping the younger two in line. And she is the backbone of the team, and other girls follow her lead." All three girls say this will be a special season, regardless of how it turns out, because of the opportunity to play with and alongside each other.

"I've never played on a basketball team with them, unlike when we're at home," Aliyyat said. "So yeah, its fun. Plus I haven't seen another team with three sisters on it, playing together."

"Sometimes its fun," notes Ayisat. "Sometimes we get mad at each other but we are sisters. And we have chemistry on the court. It's fun."

Zenab appears the most animated of the trio. She indicates she can be more high-strung as well, and how her emotions could occasionally get in the way of basketball, and how Ayisat keeps her focused.

"I would always get upset with myself, but she'd tell me 'don't get mad, it's messing up your game,'" Zenab said. "That would stay with me. She motivates me, mentors me on the court.

"We get mad at each other at times, and at first I let it affect my game. But we also learned to leave [disagreements] at home and play as a team.

Then we fight after the game – the 'sister' thing."

All three are bright and very interested in their education. They said they want to become medical doctors, although when Zenab mentions pursuing studies in obstetrics and gynecology, Ayisat rolls her eyes and mutters "oh my goodness" a few times.

"This is what I have to deal with when I'm at home," Zenab said, smiling. The Vikings will finish other tournament play this week, and resume East Valley League action on Monday, Jan. 7, against Verdugo Hills. They currently share first place with Arleta – both teams are 2-0 – but Monroe has won 26 consecutive league games since moving to the East Valley in 2010. Before that, the Vikings won or shared Valley Mission League titles in the 2008-09 and 2009-10 seasons.

It's a nice little dynasty Brooks has built since becoming head coach in 2004. And despite the youth of his team – "I only have two seniors starting, the others are freshman, sophomore and junior who did not play because of injury last year" – it could wind up being one of his better teams.

"The (earlier) wins over Temple and Keppel are big for us," Brooks said. "I feel real confident of getting to the City (Div-II) championship game and competing in the state tournament. By

playoff time we will be ready."

And should the Vikings see St Bernard down the road, in the state playoffs, Ayisat said that would be a good thing. "I hope we play them again," she said.