

Indiana Elite 2017 claims 16U National Championship

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LAS VEGAS — For the second consecutive year, Indiana Elite has a national champion. This time, it's in the 16U division.

Indiana Elite 2017 rolled to a 66-48 rout of the Utah Prospects on Sunday to complete a perfect 8-0 week in Vegas and claim the crown as the nation's best.

Two weeks ago, it seemed like little more than a pipe dream.

Fresh off an 0-3 showing at the adidas Gauntlet Finale in Atlanta, Indiana Elite 2017 was left searching for answers. Adversity hit, and the team had a choice to make: Point fingers and fall apart, or grow together and figure it out.

“We really ended May on a high note, and I was excited about the progress and the accomplishments,” said IE coach Ryan Owens. “Then we came back and kind of lost our momentum. We went to Atlanta and kind of got smacked around, which was a good experience for us at the end of the day because I think it humbled us a little bit. We went back to the drawing board after that, and really went back to the roots of basketball. We just played solid team defense, and started turning down a good shot offensively to get your teammate a great one. “

In the face of that adversity, Owens and Co. found strength in one another, and persevered. They came together, played for one another, and became champions.

“It was a beautiful thing,” Owens said. “It's a great feeling, man. The guys just played harder than their opponents at the end of the day. There's no magic sauce, we just played harder.”

Along the way, they beat the very teams that left them frustrated in the first place.

There was Team Wall, who beat Indiana Elite in Atlanta in the lowest point of the season. IE beat them 62-45 in pool play on Friday.

There were the Utah Prospects, a team that dominated IE in Dallas. Indiana Elite beat them twice in Vegas, once from behind in pool play (56-55), and once in emphatic fashion for the championship.

And then there the NY Rens, who ended this team's season in Vegas a year ago while they were part of the EG10 program. Twelve months later, Indiana Elite sent them home with a 55-47 win in the semifinals on Sunday morning.

"It's always good to punch somebody back in the mouth that punched you in the mouth," Owens said. "To be able to knock those guys off on the way to the championship, it just makes the championship a little bit better."

It may sound cliché, but Indiana Elite 2017 needed contributions from every player to win the title on Sunday. Bol Riek, a 7-foot-2 big man from the South Sudan, stepped up in a big way when his team needed him most this weekend.

Park Tudor's Jaren Jackson had to sit much of Saturday morning's game against the Michigan Mustangs due to foul trouble, so Riek got his chance.

And he delivered.

Riek had six points and seven rebounds in the win, his best game of the season to date.

But he surpassed it with his performance in the next game. Against No. 1 overall seed New Orleans Elite, who had lost only one of 18 games in the Adidas Uprising series entering Saturday, Riek had 12 points (4-5 FG) and three blocks.

Riek banked in two consecutive 3-pointers at a critical juncture in the second half to put New Orleans away.

It was performances like those that helped Indiana Elite claim the crown on

Sunday. North Central's Emmanuel Little also buried two 3-pointers in the win over New Orleans Elite, and pulled down 11 rebounds.

Hamilton Heights' Sterling Weatherford turned up the defensive pressure on the Michigan Mustangs and helped IE pull away in the second half. East Chicago's Jermaine Cousnard was active and alert defensively, and had a couple of beautiful assists late in the semifinal win over the Rens.

Pendleton Heights' Mark Albers buried five 3-pointers and scored 18 points in a quarterfinal win over the Compton Magic. He also had three 3-pointers in Sunday's title game.

Mount Vernon's Erick Shepherd had his best week of the year. He had six points on 3-for-3 shooting against New Orleans Elite, had 10 points and 7 rebounds against the Compton Magic, and added another 10-point, 7-rebound performance against Utah in the championship.

Park Tudor's Kobe Webster was outstanding in the title game, turning in his best performance since the Chicago Classic. Webster had 16 points, 8 assists and only one turnover in the biggest game of the year for Indiana Elite.

"That's a testament to those kids and being mentally tough," Owens said. "Being tough is not throwing an elbow. Being tough is coming to play at the 8 a.m. game. Being ready when that ball tips off at 8 a.m., that's being mentally tough. We showed some of that this weekend. We don't win a couple of these games without Shep coming off the bench and getting us 10 points. We don't win a game without Mark Albers coming out there and giving us a 12-point run, hitting 3s from all over the court. We don't win a game without Bol hitting two 3s, Bol posting up deep calling for the ball, Bol blocking shots.

"And we're doing all this talking, and we haven't even talked about one of the most talented players in the state of Indiana, Jaren Jackson. His devotion to being the best defender player says a lot about his character because he doesn't care if he scores two points or he scores 20 points. He wants to block every shot. He wants to hedge on every pick and roll. That's the exciting part about Jaren Jackson. You don't see too many top echelon

players who really care about their teammates, care about defense first.”

He’s right, we haven’t mentioned Jackson, who had one of the most outstanding performances in the tournament. Jackson had 15 points, 13 rebounds and 13 blocks in Sunday’s semifinal win over the NY Rens, and he blocked six more shots in the title game against the Utah Prospects.

But the team’s best player this weekend was Mount Vernon’s Michael Ertel, who played with a purpose and a passion unmatched by the guards he went up against. Ertel was terrific in all aspects of the game. He put pressure on the other teams’ ball handlers, controlled the pace of the game, knocked down 3-pointers, pull-ups and got to the rim, and played harder than everybody else on the floor.

Ertel had 18 points and 4 assists in the win over the Compton Magic, 12 points in the win over the NY Rens, and 16 points and 4 rebounds in the title game.

“There wasn’t a better guard in the tournament this weekend than Mike Ertel,” Owens said. “If you watched the tournament, and you really watched each player and what they did offensively and defensively, there wasn’t a better guard out here this weekend. I’m not saying he’s the best guard, but he was the best guard this weekend. I wouldn’t trade him for any other player in the Gauntlet right now.”

Ertel harassed NY Rens point guard Jose Alvarado from start to finish, and held him well below his scoring average. Alvarado, who has a number of high-major scholarship offers, was the main reason Owens’ club lost to the Rens in Vegas last year.

“It’s a lesson for me as a coach with him [Ertel], to never give up on anybody, keep putting them in a situation to be successful, and give them defined roles,” Owens said. “He took the responsibility of shutting down one of the best guards in the country. I guarantee you Jose don’t wanna see him tomorrow.”