

The battles within



PHOTOS BY ALVIN JORNADA / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Santa Rosa's Josue Gutierrez follows through on his mid-air attack during a Tuesday varsity badminton match between Santa Rosa and Casa Grande high schools in Petaluma.

Competition gets heated during Santa Rosa practice as players try to climb ladder of loaded boys roster

PETALUMA

Brett Williams has a problem. Santa Rosa High's badminton coach is so loaded on the boys' side of his roster, his practices are becoming a battle zone of challenges as players try to climb the ladder.

"I think my top nine kids would be the No. 1 player at any other school," he said.

Leading the way is senior and returning All-Empire Player of the Year Oliver Staten, who didn't drop a regular-season match last year and was a driv-

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ing force behind the Panthers' North Bay League title run, the second in as many seasons.

But chomping at the bit to dethrone him are not crosstown rivals, but guys he faces every day in practice.

"Goal? To be No. 1, to beat



Santa Rosa's Jerry Vang prepares to serve during a varsity badminton match between Santa Rosa and Casa Grande high schools in Petaluma on Tuesday.

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Oliver. I'm getting close," said Josue Gutierrez, a senior and the Panthers' No. 2 player. "It's a really strong rivalry. For 20 minutes on the court it's OK for them to be your enemy, but after, you guys are still friends."

Williams, who has seen his fair share of ladder battles on past squads, said this year is particularly intense.

"They are close, but I have never had teammates so closely battle," he said.

Reach No. 1 on the Panthers' ladder and you are likely the best player around. Staten is the reigning top dog.

"This year, man, they are fighting and scratching to take it away from him," he said. "I kind of just let it go because they are all friends."

Staten said the competition is a gift.

"It's very fortunate for us," he said. "Because when you are playing the best people in the league every day, you get better."

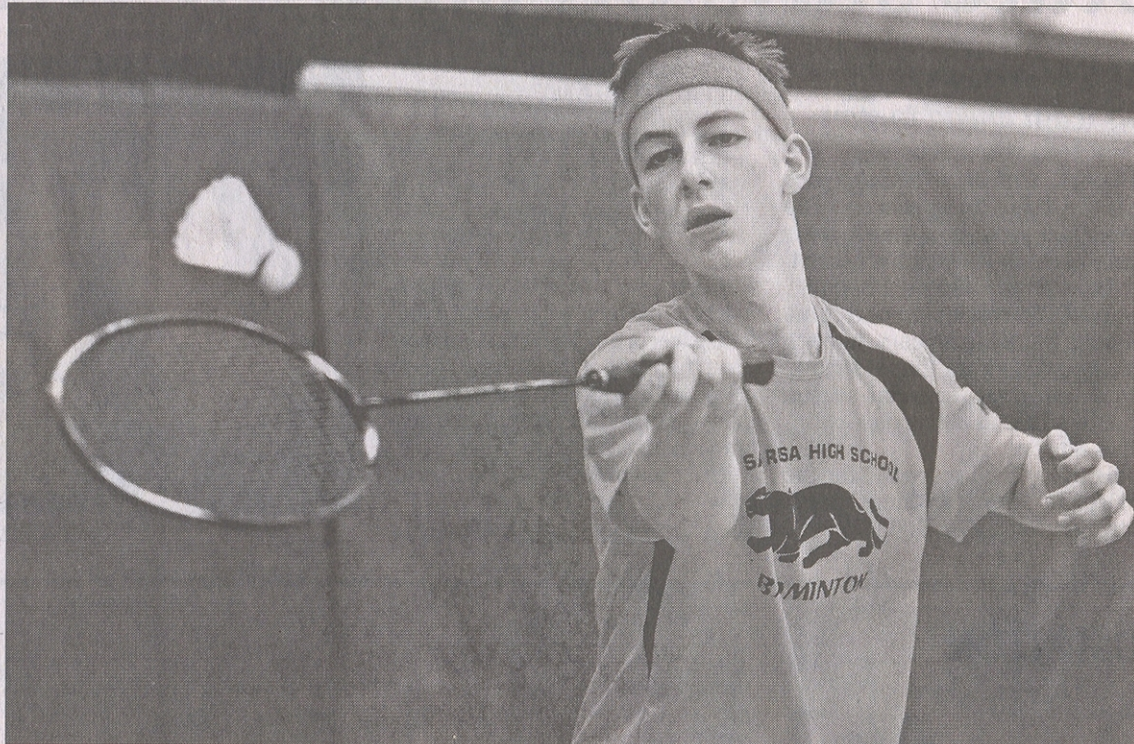
And they play each other for hours on end. "Real" practice ends around 5:30 p.m. but Staten, Gutierrez and Vang sometimes don't leave the gym until after 8 p.m.

"Every night," Staten said. "It's not out of interest in trying to beat anybody, it's that I enjoy the game."

If history is any indication, Panthers like to battle each other. After all, Staten played behind teammate and 2014 player of the year Liam Galbraith before wresting the top spot from him. And the Panthers' No. 3 guy, senior Jerry Vang, only started playing seriously last year, but after months of extra hours at the competitive sessions at the Boys & Girls Club, he is hot on his teammates' heels.

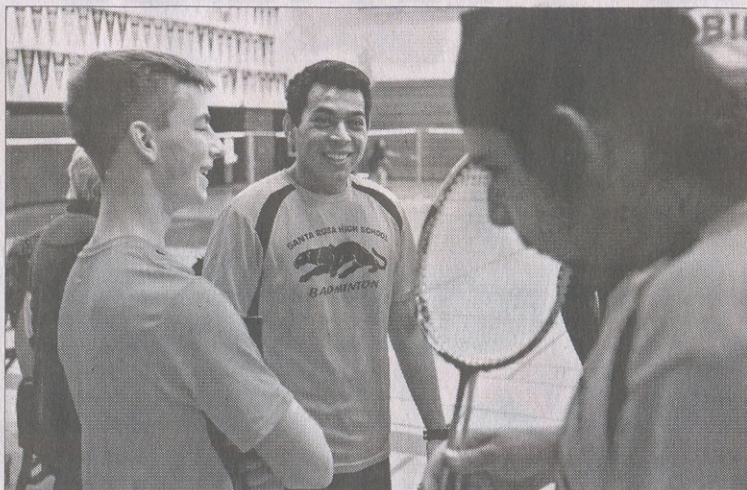
And Gutierrez? As a sophomore, he didn't even make the junior varsity squad. He was allowed to practice as a "courtesy" player. That's a pretty good climb to the No. 2 spot on the most competitive squad in the area.

"I love having a strong team



PHOTOS BY ALVIN JORNADA / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Santa Rosa's Oliver Staten lobs the shuttle back over the net during a varsity badminton match between Santa Rosa and Casa Grande high schools in Petaluma on Tuesday.



Santa Rosa's Oliver Staten, left, and Josue Gutierrez joke with teammate Nathan Rhodes.

we can practice with," Gutierrez said. "It kind of sucks that we can't use them in actual games and prove ourselves.

"Our rivalry, it elevates our game. Every time we play we are always striving to see what can we do better?"

So far, not much. But still, the team title won't be a giveaway.

Santa Rosa defeated Casa Grande 10-5 in the Gauchos' daunting home gym Tuesday

afternoon. No boys singles, doubles or mixed doubles pair lost.

It was a good test for the Panthers, at least for Staten, who defeated the talented Casa senior Tony Lin, 21-14, 21-11. Lin is probably the best player not wearing orange and black this season. Gutierrez downed Zach Parreira 21-10, 21-13 and Vang beat Nick Lampe 21-3, 21-3.

But despite the firepower on the boys' roster, the road to the

NBL title will not be uncontested.

Windsor should be strong with a slate of returning players. Montgomery boasts a solid girls squad that may turn up the heat on the crosstown Panthers-Vikings rivalry.

Montgomery returns No. 1 Grace Kouch, a senior, and No. 2 Karen Cai, a junior. Montgomery swept their two league matches with Santa Rosa last season.

But Montgomery coach Mary Lehman is without the services of George Nacouzi, the Vikings' former No. 1 who injured his knee and is out for the season, according to Lehman.

Lehman expects another fun league chase.

"I think Windsor has some great players, Casa has some good ones. Their seniors are going to be great," she said.

"Santa Rosa, they are loaded," she said. "But it's not going to be a cakewalk."

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