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LOOKING UP: Emily Quinn of the St. Thomas Aquinas Raiders (left) attempts to solve the defence of Milton District Mustangs player Keisha Alexander. Aquinas fell 63-35 to the Mustangs in Thursday's Halton high school senior girls' basketball Division 2 final at Sheridan College.

Milton's sister act too much for Raiders to overcome

Aquinas falls in senior girls' basketball Division 2 final

■ **By Herb Garbutt**
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

As a team captain, Emily Quinn has been a player for her teammates to look up to.

But Thursday at Sheridan College, it was Quinn who was looking up — way up — to another player on the court.

The St. Thomas Aquinas Grade 12 student often found herself with the unenviable task of guarding Milton District's Kayla Alexander in the Halton high school senior girls' Division 2 basketball final. A key member of the national junior team, the 6-foot-4 Alexander towered over her opponents.

"She's huge," said the 5-foot-4 Quinn. "A lot of the time I had to box her out and she would just reach over me and grab the ball."

Not surprisingly, Alexander dominated the boards on her way to a 30-point game that led Milton to a 63-35 victory. For the first half of the game, though, the Raiders were determined to play the role of the upstart spoiler.

Knowing his team was unlikely to have much success in the battle under the basket, coach Mike Giammichele's plan was to fire at will from the outside — which fortunately was his team's strength. Aquinas hit four threes, including two from Denise Belisan and one each by Quinn and Madeline Mann, in the first 10 minutes to offset Alexander's control in the paint as Aquinas kept pace at 18-18. The Raiders were even doing surprisingly well gathering in offensive rebounds in the early going.

However, the Raiders' shooting magic would not last. After going 4-for-8 on their first attempts from beyond the arc, they went just 1-for-9 the rest of the way, not hitting another until the fourth quarter.

The Raiders also briefly lost Quinn, who had a team-high eight points, when she sprained her ankle in the third quarter. She went to the bench to have it quickly taped and

returned to play the rest of the game. But, by the time she returned to the court, Milton had stretched its seven-point halftime lead to 27 with a 24-1 run that began in the final minute of the opening half.

"Heart can only take you so far," said Quinn, who will graduate this year along with Anne O'Connor and co-captain Taryn McKenna. "But if you look at the scoreboard, it really wasn't that bad. We scared the crap out of them. We left everything out there. They've got a national player, we have one rep player."

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■ *Aquinas player*
Emily Quinn

Despite losing two starters from last year's team to other Halton schools — one to Holy Trinity and one to Assumption — the Raiders had the likes of Melanie Enright and Grade 10 post player Nycole Lopes to step in. Aquinas went 8-3 and knocked off the defending champion Burlington Central Trojans (10-1) to reach the final. Aquinas had set the bar high from the outset, though.

"We had this goal to go undefeated," Giammichele said, "of course, not knowing Milton was going to have a 6-foot-4 girl coming back."

Alexander spent last year at the National Elite Development Academy in Hamilton, but decided in late August to return to Milton so that she and her sister Keisha, who had 17 points, could play their final high school season together.

Quinn was looking to bookend her high school career with Halton titles. She was a member of the senior team in Grade 9 when Aquinas won the AA championship. This time, she was hoping to contribute more to a victory.

"I had a role, but not a huge role (in Grade 9)," she said. "Being a senior this time, and a captain, I felt more like someone the other players could look up to."

Even giving up a foot to her opponent, Quinn seemed to be able to do that.

Aquinas seniors hope to soar to Division 2 volleyball title

The St. Thomas Aquinas Raiders are hoping to reach greater heights.

The Raiders' senior boys' volleyball team, coming off an 11-1 regular season, defeated the Milton District Mustangs Tuesday to advance to the Halton high school Division 2 final. The Raiders will face the Acton Bearcats Monday, when Aquinas coach Ron Szpakowski feels the game will be decided in the high altitudes of the Sheridan College gym.

"We've got some boys who can jump out of the gymnasium," Szpakowski said. "If we can control our passes, then we can beat them above the net."

The Raiders are a veteran team — they can put six players on the court with at least 18 years of combined experience at the senior level — with the size to complement their abilities.

"We've been fortunate. We've got some big boys," Szpakowski said. "They're all six-foot-

ers."

Led by fourth-year senior powers Joseph Asztalos and Anthony Starcevic, the Raiders went to three sets only twice this season — in their one loss to Corpus Christi and in a victory over Pearson. The Raiders also have a pair

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■ *Aquinas coach*
Ron Szpakowski

of third-year seniors in setter Tyler Vadacchino and middle Evan St. Hilaire. Add that to last year's MVP (middle Matt Blaha) returning libero Patterson Farrell and 6-foot-5 Charlie Drouin, who moved up from the junior squad, and the Raiders boast a deep lineup.

And that's after losing two eligible-to-return starters from last year. Eric Fram, the team's most valuable player two years ago, chose to play football this fall and Ryan Thomson took the season off to concentrate on his final year of basketball.

The Raiders swept Acton in their regular-season meeting, but split two tournament

clashes with the Bearcats. Acton does have the experience of having played in a Halton final.

"They have a number of players who have been to Sheridan, before so there won't be any wobbly knees on their side," Szpakowski said.

Regardless of the outcome, both teams are headed to the provincial championships, with Aquinas representing the Golden Horseshoe in AA and Acton representing A.

The Raiders' juniors also advanced to the Halton final Tuesday with a three-set upset over Milton District. The Mustangs came in with a 10-1 record, including a win over the 7-2 Raiders. Aquinas built an early lead in the deciding game, then held off a Mustangs rally for a nail-biting 16-14 victory.

Aquinas learned from its loss to Milton and kept the ball away from the Mustangs' best player.

Three returnees — middles Ben Szpakowski and Will Coulthard as well as libero-turned-setter Thomas Meagher — are

benefiting from extensive playing time as Grade 9s.

"Our young guys got a lot of court time and got a chance to learn to play the game, and that's been obvious this year," said Szpakowski, who also coaches the juniors.

The Raiders will now face another 10-1 team in the White Oaks Wildcats, who are a more balanced team with a decided height advantage.

"They're six to eight inches bigger than us in each and every spot," Szpakowski said. "We've surprised a lot teams with David and Goliath performances. We'll have to play tough D and make smart plays."

The Division 1 finals, also slated for Monday, will feature all-Oakville matchups. The Iroquois Ridge Trailblazers will face the Loyola Hawks in the junior final, with the Holy Trinity Titans squaring off against the Oakville Trafalgar Red Devils in the senior championship game.

— *Herb Garbutt*