

Covenant girls lacrosse team rallies to win VISAA Division II state championship

GLEN ALLEN — Just before the second half of Saturday's VISAA Division II state girls lacrosse championship game began, Covenant junior captain Lina Touririne glanced over at the tournament director setting up the medals and championship trophies.

She then turned to her teammates before they took the field and said, "look at our trophy."

Delaney Poindexter made Touririne's statement a reality not long after, scoring the game-winning goal early into the second overtime to lift Covenant to an 8-7 win over Nansemond-Suffolk Academy and secure the program's first state championship since 2015.

"This win has been a long time coming and I'm super glad that we got to get it today," Poindexter said. "It's a hot day, it was a long time, it went into overtime, but we just kept fighting, fighting for each other and the girl standing right next to you and we just got it."

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Covenant had to battle back from a three-goal deficit with 20 minutes left in the game to force overtime.

Trailing 6-3, Poindexter got the ball rolling for the Eagles with a goal on the man advantage to trim the lead to 6-4 with 16:11 left. Kerrigan Poindexter then cashed in on a well-executed pick-and-roll play with 13:55 left to make

it a one-goal game.

The Eagles didn't stop there.

With the ball behind the net, Delaney Poindexter faked like she was going to run around the net, but instead made a nice crossover move back to the near side and scored a goal to even the game at 6-6 with 11:03 left.

Less than two minutes later, Kerrigan Poindexter gave Covenant its first lead of the game on a nice goal from behind the net to make it 7-6 with 9:50 left.

Nansemond-Suffolk answered as Marlin Price scored her third goal of the game on a two-man advantage to level the score at 7-7.

The Saints had an opportunity to win the game in regulation, but Covenant goalkeeper Katy Varaksa made a great point-blank stop on a shot from Maddie Byars with less than two minutes to play to force overtime.

"I have my utmost trust in my team and my defense and my midfield," Varaksa said. "I knew that if we started off slow we'd pull it through because we're gritty, we're scrappy and we knew we wanted this, we knew we worked for this and we knew that we deserved this."

After a scoreless first overtime period, Covenant Coach Colleen Norair pulled her team together for one final pep talk.

Her inspirational words did the trick.

Delaney Poindexter scored the golden goal 52 seconds into the second overtime to secure the win and the championship for the Eagles.

"I just saw my teammates, Kerrigan [Poindexter] and MA [Margaret-Ann Graves], they just created space for me," Delaney Poindexter said. "I just

knew it was going to come down to a last-second shot, and just wanted so badly for my team. I saw the shot and I just placed it."

After the goal, the Blue Ridge Conference Player of the Year tossed her stick in the air and celebrated with her teammates and fans as they stormed the field.

Saturday's title game had a similar feeling to Thursday's state semifinals, which also saw Covenant fall behind early, then rally to win. Page Henry scored a minute into the game to give NSA a 1-0 lead. Grace Russell and Marlin Price each added goals to build a 3-0 cushion with 17:30 left in the first half.

Covenant shook off the sluggish start with three straight goals. Graves bounced one past the keeper to put the Eagles on the scoreboard with 16:43 left in the half, then Delaney Poindexter scored off a penalty opportunity and Peyton Garner found the back of the net on a great dodge move at the 7:41 mark to tie the game at 3-3.

Price closed out the half with a goal with 2:03 left to give the Saints a 4-3 lead at intermission. NSA then added two goals early in the second half to take a 6-3 lead and set the stage for the Eagles' comeback win.

Covenant's state championship, along with St Anne's-Belfield's earlier in the day, marked a banner day for girls lacrosse in Charlottesville.

Eagles coaches praised the work of UVa coach Julie Myers, along with Colleen Shearer, Carrington King and others for starting the Cavalier Lacrosse program in Central Virginia, which has prepared players for days like Saturday.

"The youth is amazing, because after this championship win, the people

below us are going to see this," Varaksa said. "They're going to see we have a great athletic program, that our girls are built for this, they are made for this and that they can do this and we're so glad to be influencing that."

Delaney Poindexter agreed.

"Charlottesville has just been balling in all sports," she said. "I'm super proud to be a part of this community."

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Sam Brunelle eager to help Virginia women's basketball program return to its glory days

[John Harvey](#)

Sam Brunelle grew up 30 minutes from John Paul Jones Arena and served as a ball girl at University of Virginia basketball games as a child.

As she got older and blossomed into an All-American high school player at William Monroe, Brunelle continued to attend Virginia women's basketball games, imagining one day having the opportunity to don the blue and orange.

That day came Saturday, when Brunelle announced that she will transfer from Notre Dame to UVa to play for the Cavaliers and new coach Amaka Agugua-Hamilton.

"I had this indescribable feeling that this was the place for me," Brunelle told The Daily Progress on Sunday. "I had the same exact indescribable feeling when I knew Notre Dame was right for me. When I realized I had that feeling, I knew UVa was it and there was no reason to not take the opportunity."

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Brunelle announced March 30 that she would leave Notre Dame after three seasons with the program. Less than three weeks later, she announced she was coming home to Central Virginia to play for the Cavaliers.

Brunelle is the first player to commit to the Virginia women's basketball

program since Agugua-Hamilton was named head coach on March 21.

"Coach Mox" hopes to return the Cavaliers back to national prominence after several trying seasons. Brunelle is excited to be part of that challenge.

"The coaching staff is extremely passionate about getting the program back to its glory days," Brunelle said. "...Being a UVa fan, it's exciting to get the opportunity to come back home and get this program back to that."

Brunelle also is eager to showcase the talent that made her one of the top high school recruits in the country at William Monroe and an All-ACC Freshman team selection during her first season at Notre Dame.

"I'm excited to be able to get back to using my whole skill palette and versatility at UVa," Brunelle said.

The 6-foot-2 forward had a great start to her college career under legendary Notre Dame coach Muffett McGraw. She started all 31 games as a freshman and averaged 13.9 points and 5.8 rebounds for the Irish to earn all-ACC freshman honors.

The last two seasons have been trying for Brunelle as she's dealt with injuries while trying to find a role under new Notre Dame head coach Niele Ivey. She played in 17 of Notre Dame's 20 games during the COVID-19-shortened 2020-21 campaign, averaging 8.7 points and 3.8 rebounds per game while dealing with a nagging shoulder injury and knee pain.

This past season, she appeared in all 32 games and averaged 6.8 points and 1.9 rebounds a game off the bench for the Irish. For her career, she's played 80 games, including 31 starts, which all came during her freshman year.

"I have dealt with some uncontrollable injuries the past couple years, but it never stopped me from working hard and trying to improve," Brunelle said.

"Right now, I'm more motivated than ever to get back to making huge strides in my game and doing a lot of special things with UVa."

Brunelle should have plenty of opportunities to compete for quality playing time with the Cavaliers. After meeting with Agugua-Hamilton and her staff, Brunelle knew Virginia was where she needed to be.

"Coach Mox and her staff were one of the biggest reasons I wanted to come," she said. "She and her staff know not only what it takes to win, but to win and get to the [NCAA] Tournament and I firmly believe we can make those strides to do that."

In addition to being successful on the court, Agugua-Hamilton's ability to connect with players off the court was a big draw for Brunelle.

"I think what was most attractive was how she cares deeply about developing relationships with her players, as well as her staff," Brunelle said. "It's more than just basketball to them. It's about life and creating an environment where young women will not only develop on the court, but off the court as well. [Virginia athletic director] Carla Williams made one of the best moves by bringing in Coach Mox and her staff and the UVa community should be very, very excited for what's to come."

Brunelle will graduate from Notre Dame this spring and will attend UVa as a grad student. She will be enrolled in the Curry School of Education, where she plans to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. Brunelle will have two years of eligibility left, starting this upcoming season.

It didn't take long for word of Brunelle's return to Central Virginia to spread throughout the community.

"I have received an overwhelming amount of support since announcing

[Saturday] and I could not be more grateful, blessed and appreciative of all those people who are excited to see me work and help the team reach huge heights," Brunelle said. "It's rare you see people like this rally around a women's team with so much excitement like they have shown the past couple of days. This is just the start to something great and I'm excited to be a piece to the bigger puzzle to get UVa back to its glory in women's basketball."

Central Virginia has always supported its own and that was evident in January of 2020 when Notre Dame played UVa in Brunelle's return to Charlottesville. More than 5,100 fans came to John Paul Jones Arena that day, including many of Brunelle's former coaches, teachers and teammates from William Monroe. Now all of those supporters will be able to cheer on Brunelle and the Cavaliers on a regular basis.

"It's so surreal that I'm getting to play in front of all the people who supported me throughout my high school career and more," Brunelle said. "I get goosebumps just thinking about that. Like my mom has always said, 'It takes a village to raise a child' and Central Virginia has been that village and more for so many years and I can't describe how excited and happy it makes me to be able to return to that support system."

Photos: Samantha Brunelle's William Monroe basketball career

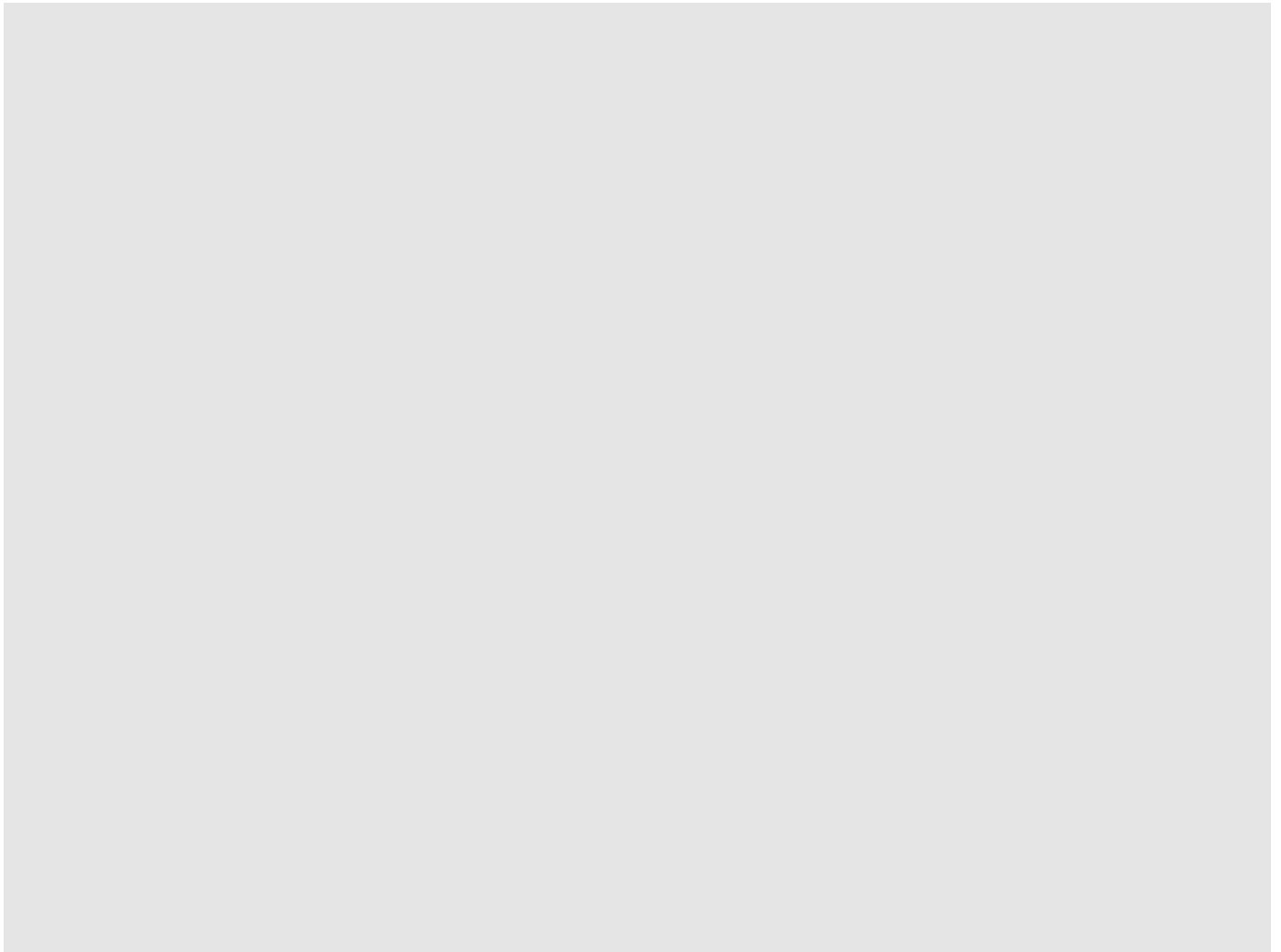
Samantha Brunelle



William Monroe freshman Samantha Brunelle.

Andrew Shurtleff

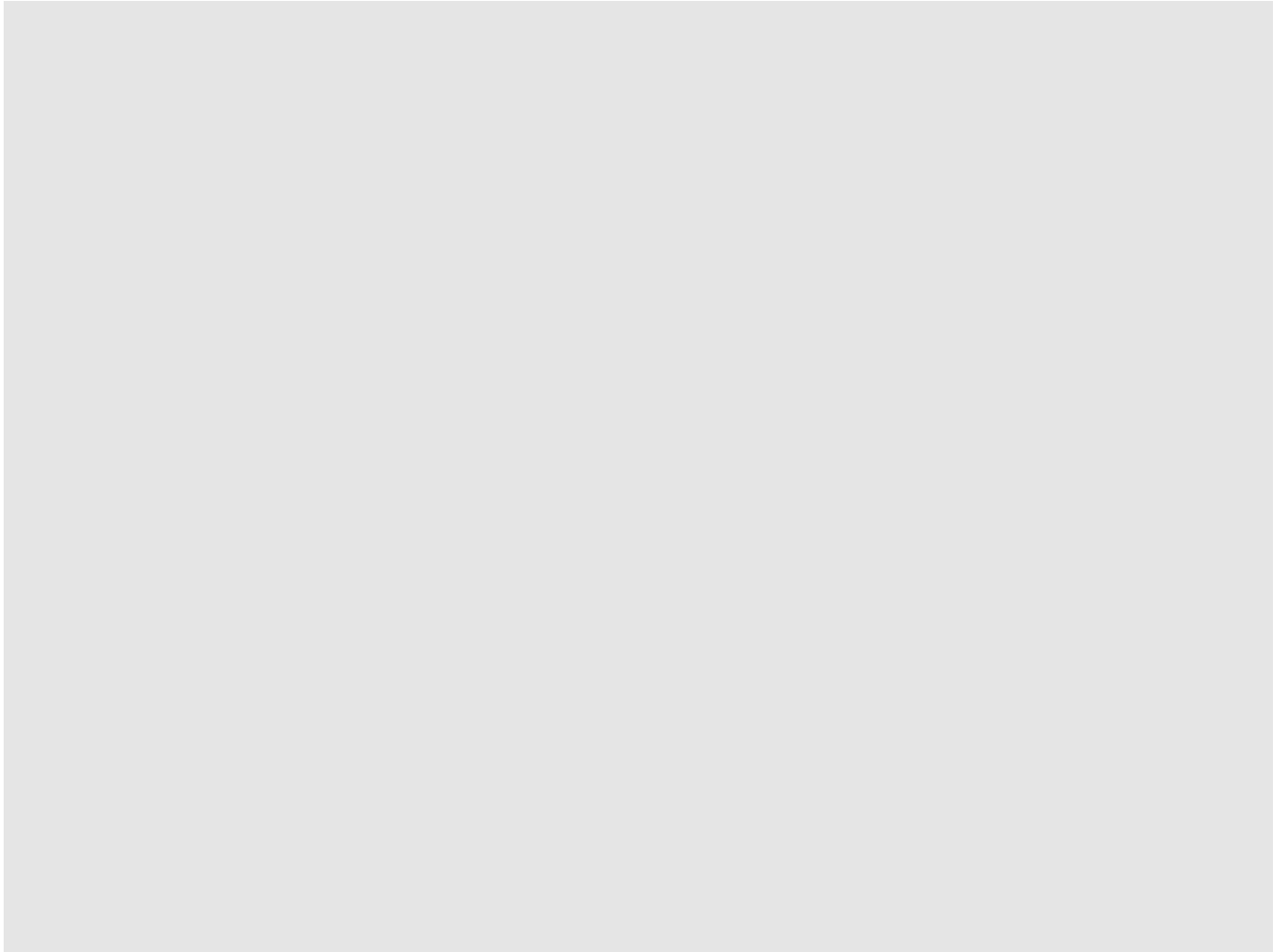
Holiday Classic



William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle dribbles the ball against Turner Ashby's Kiersten Roadcap during the Daily Progress/NBC29 Holiday Basketball Classic championship game on Wednesday night at Albemarle High School.

Brian Mellott

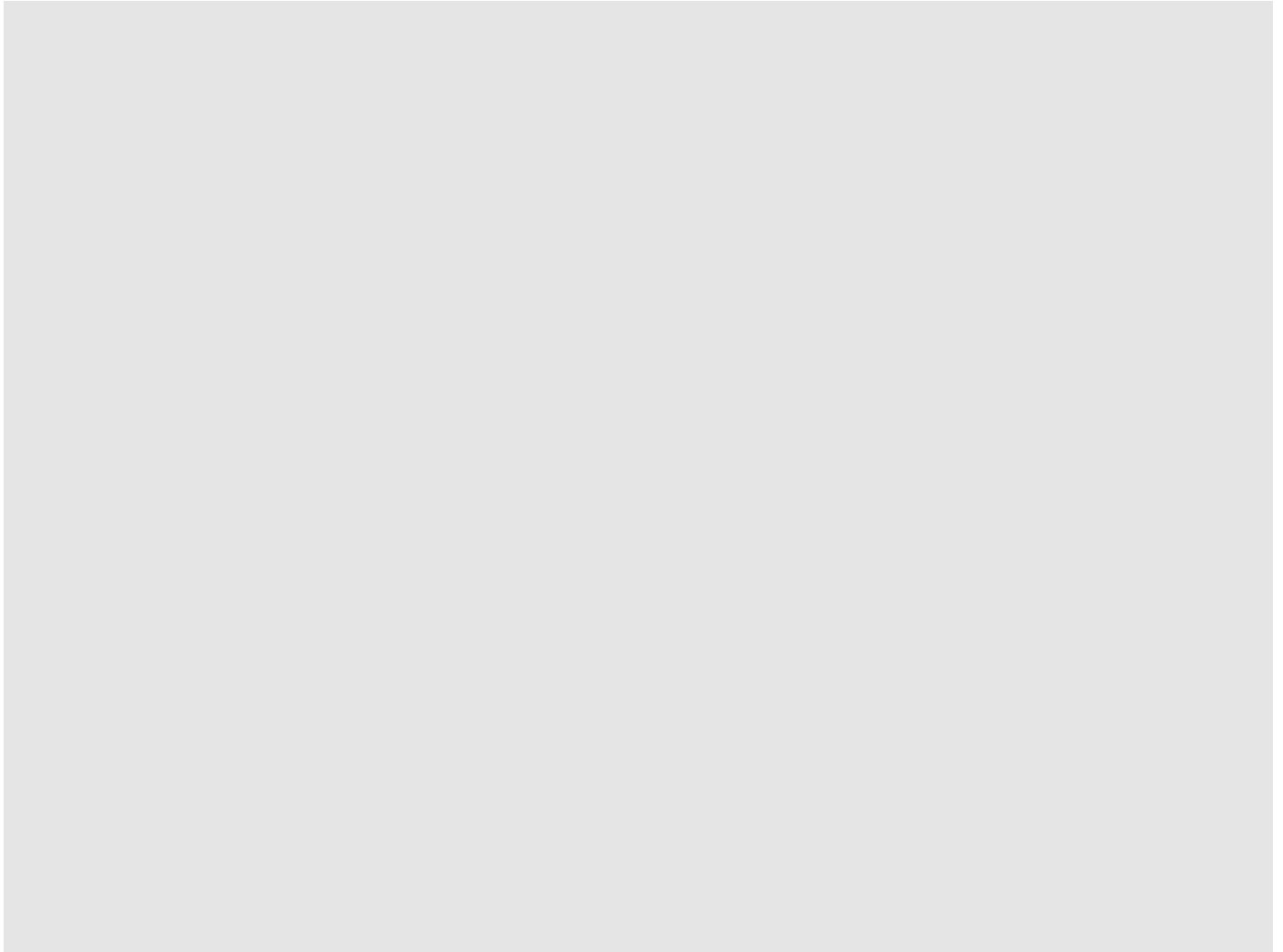
CDP 1230 HolidayHoops261.JPG



Jefferson Forest's Emily Deitrick (23) has her shot blocked by William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) during the first half of a basketball game in the 2015 Holiday Basketball Classic at Western Albemarle High School on Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2015. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress

Ryan M. Kelly

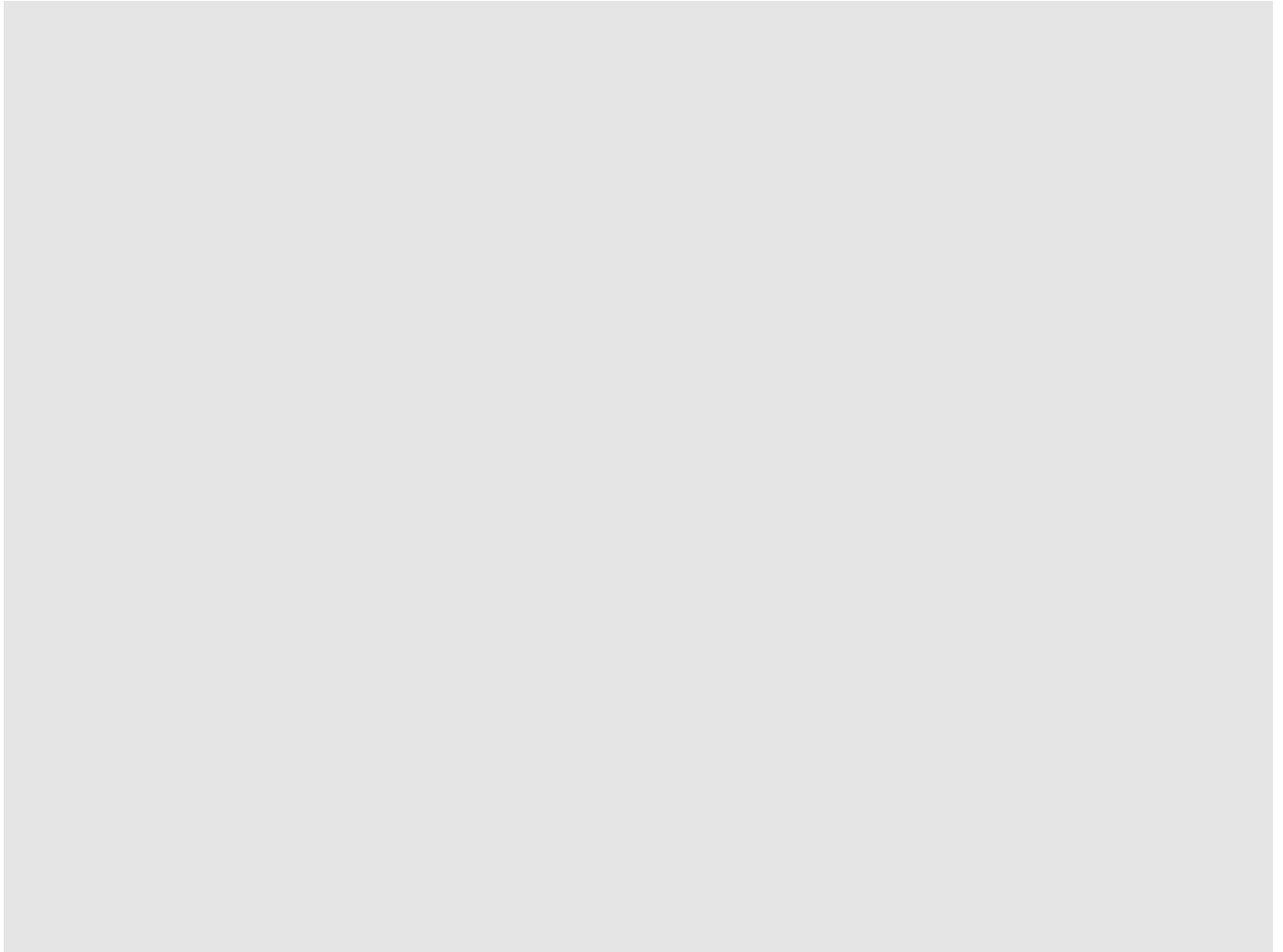
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William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots during the first half of a basketball game in the 2015 Holiday Basketball Classic at Western Albemarle High School on Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2015. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress

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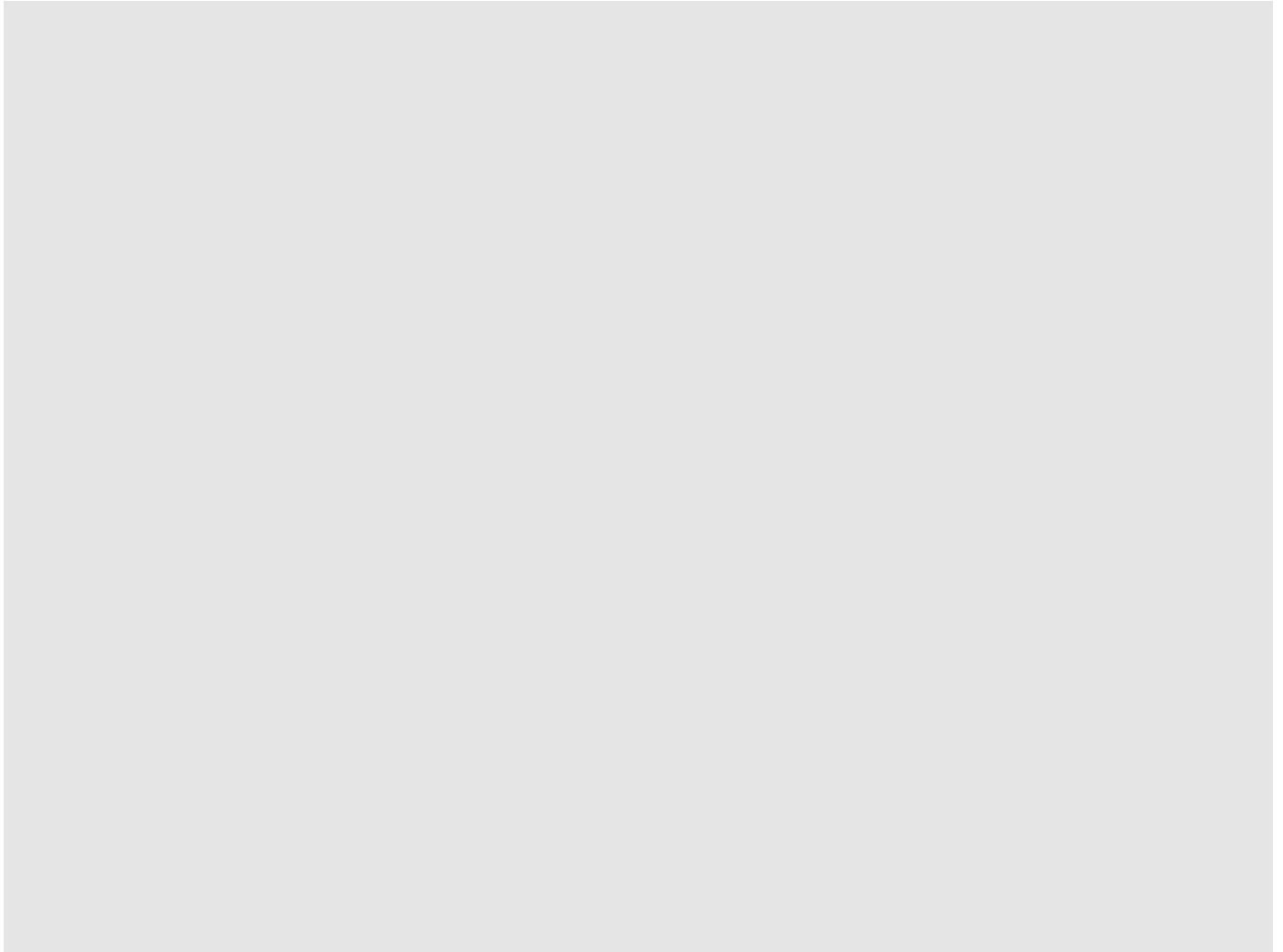
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William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots during the first half of a game against Charlottesville in the 2015 Holiday Basketball Classic on Monday, Dec. 28, 2015 at Albemarle High School. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress

Ryan M. Kelly

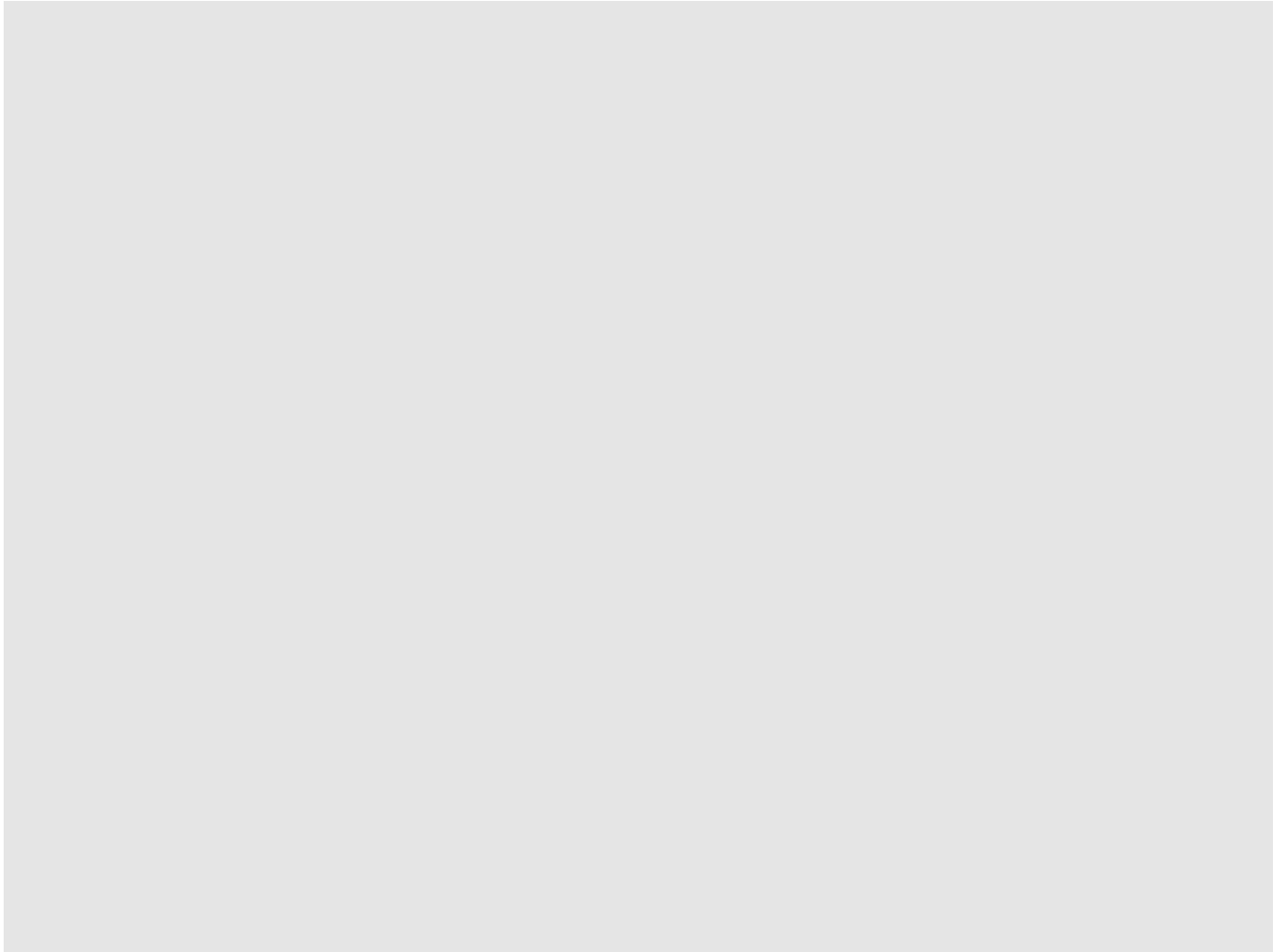
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William Monroe's Samtha Brunelle (33) rebounds during the second half of a game against Charlottesville in the 2015 Holiday Basketball Classic on Monday, Dec. 28, 2015 at Albemarle High School. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress

Ryan M. Kelly

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William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) blocks the shot of Charlottesville's Daeja Wade (31) from behind as William Monroe's Da'Jour Strother-Beasley (50) defends during the second half of a game in the 2015 Holiday Basketball Classic on Monday, Dec. 28, 2015 at Albemarle High School. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress
Ryan M. Kelly

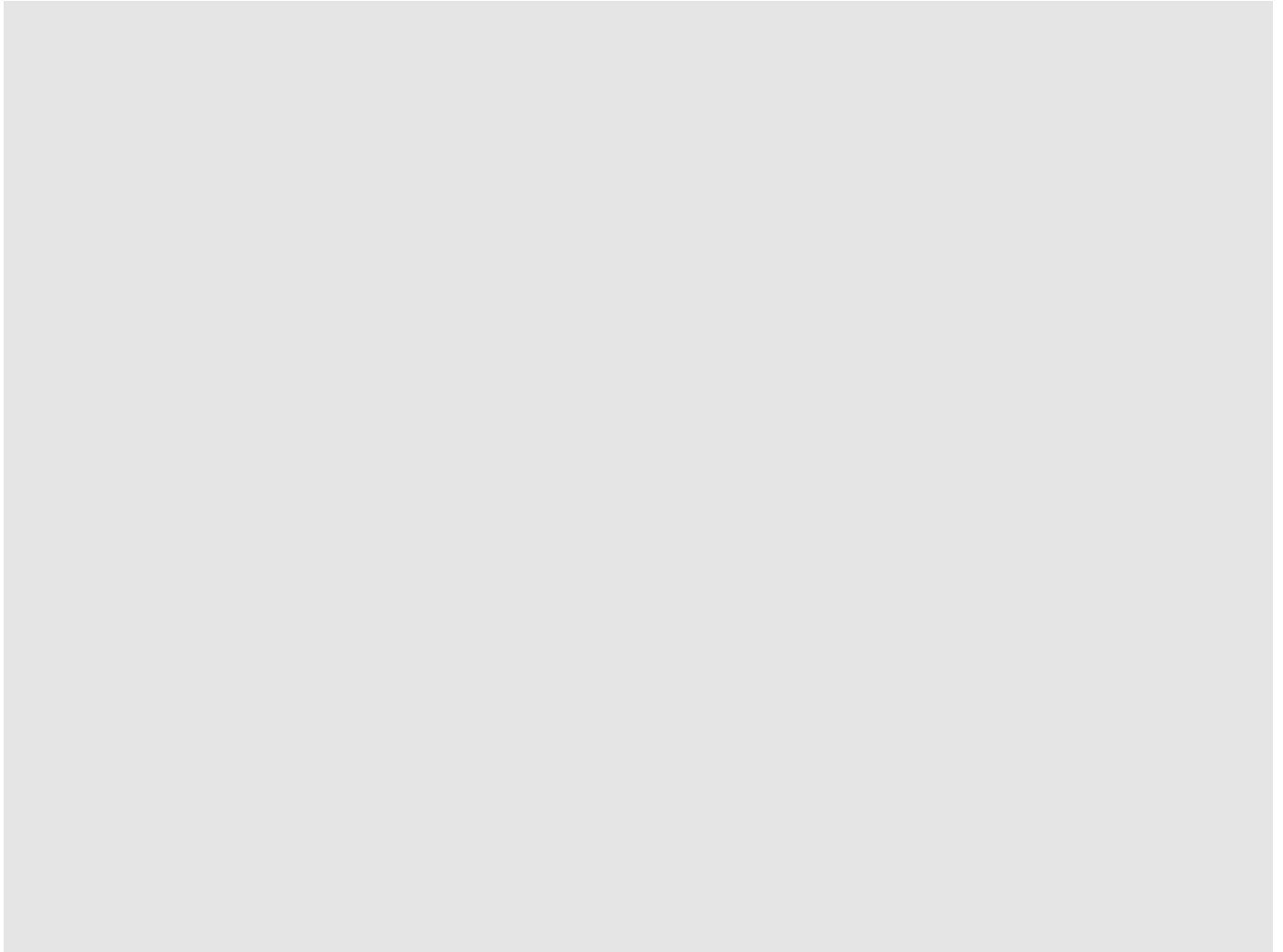
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William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) rebounds during the second half of a game against Charlottesville in the 2015 Holiday Basketball Classic on Monday, Dec. 28, 2015 at Albemarle High School. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress

Ryan M. Kelly

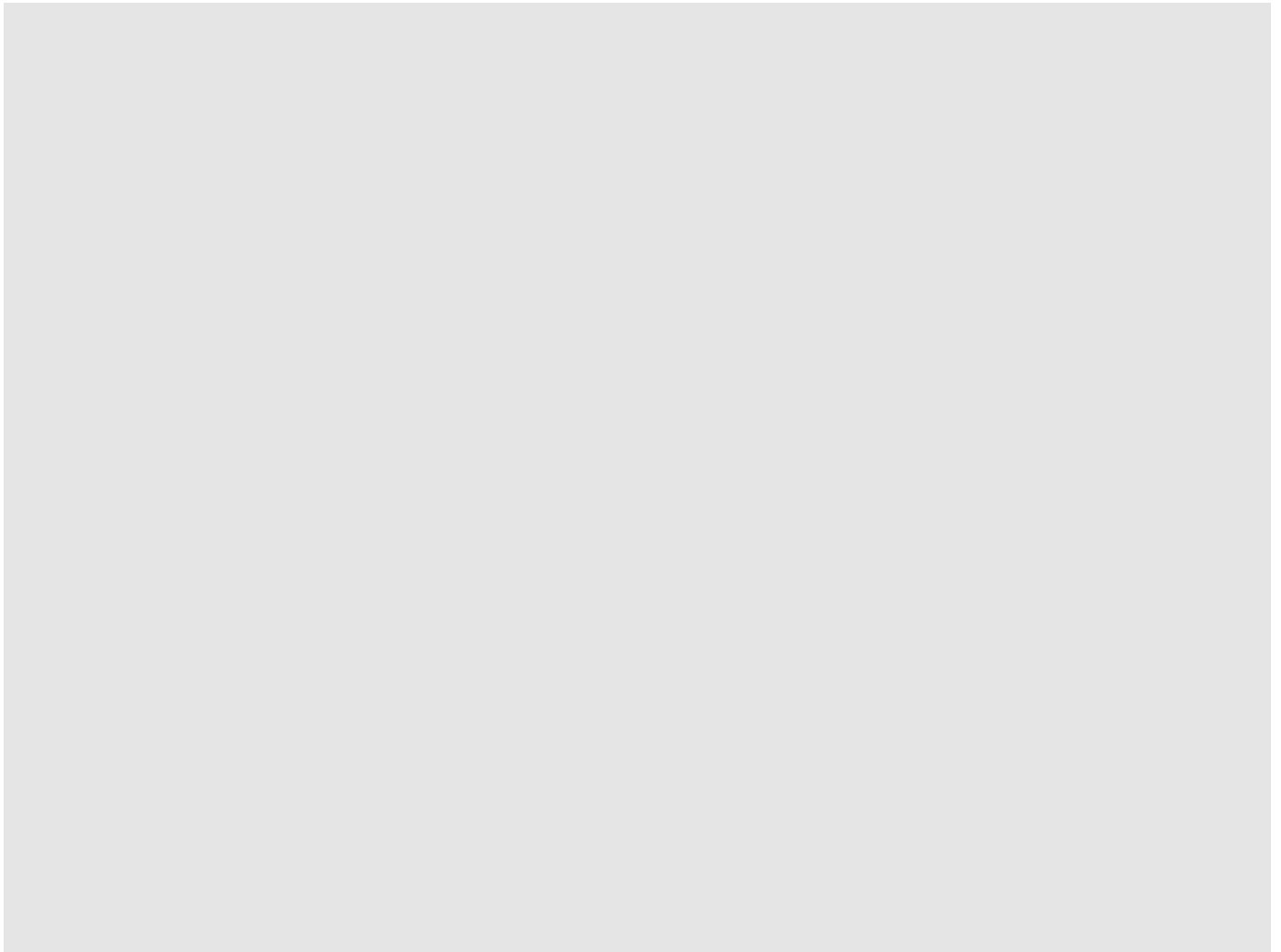
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William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) and Da'Jour Strother-Beasley (50) celebrate a win over Charlottesville in the 2015 Holiday Basketball Classic on Monday, Dec. 28, 2015 at Albemarle High School. Photo/Ryan M. Kelly/The Daily Progress

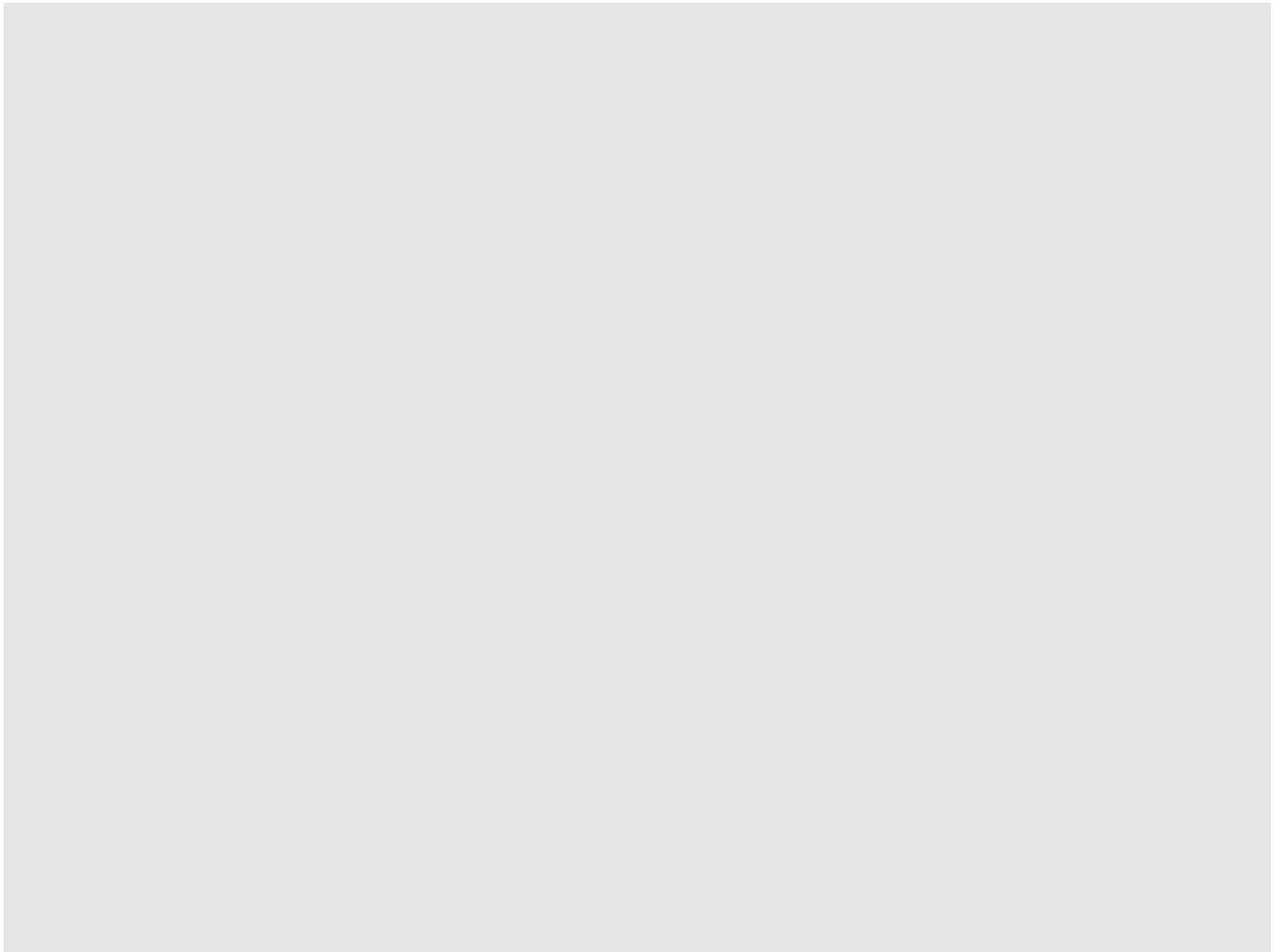
Ryan M. Kelly

Brunelle



William Monroe forward Samantha Brunelle is the Central Virginia girls basketball Player of the Year. Photo/The Daily Progress/Andrew Shurtleff

Brunelle



William Monroe sophomore Samantha Brunelle brings the ball up the court against Orange County on Tuesday night in Stanardsville.

Greg VanNostrand/For the Culpeper Star-Exponent

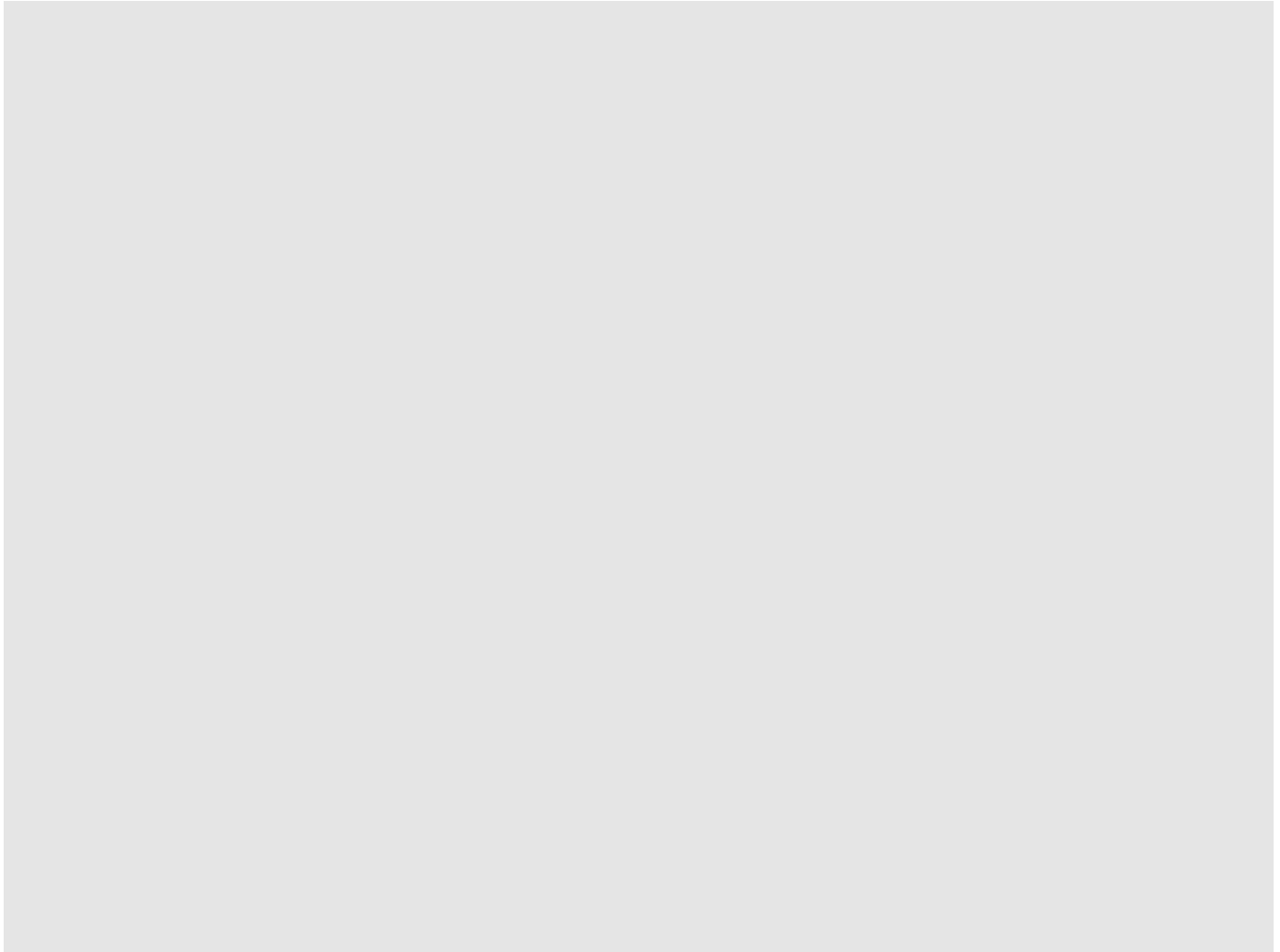
Brunelle



William Monroe basketball player Samantha Brunelle (left) and coach Jess Stafford commemorate Brunelle reaching 1,000 career points on Thursday.

TERRY BEIGIE Sports Stories Photography

Brunelle scores 1,000 point



William Monroe's sophomore sensation Sam Brunelle hugs her coach, Jess Stafford, after scoring her 1,000th point of her high school career.

Terry Beigie

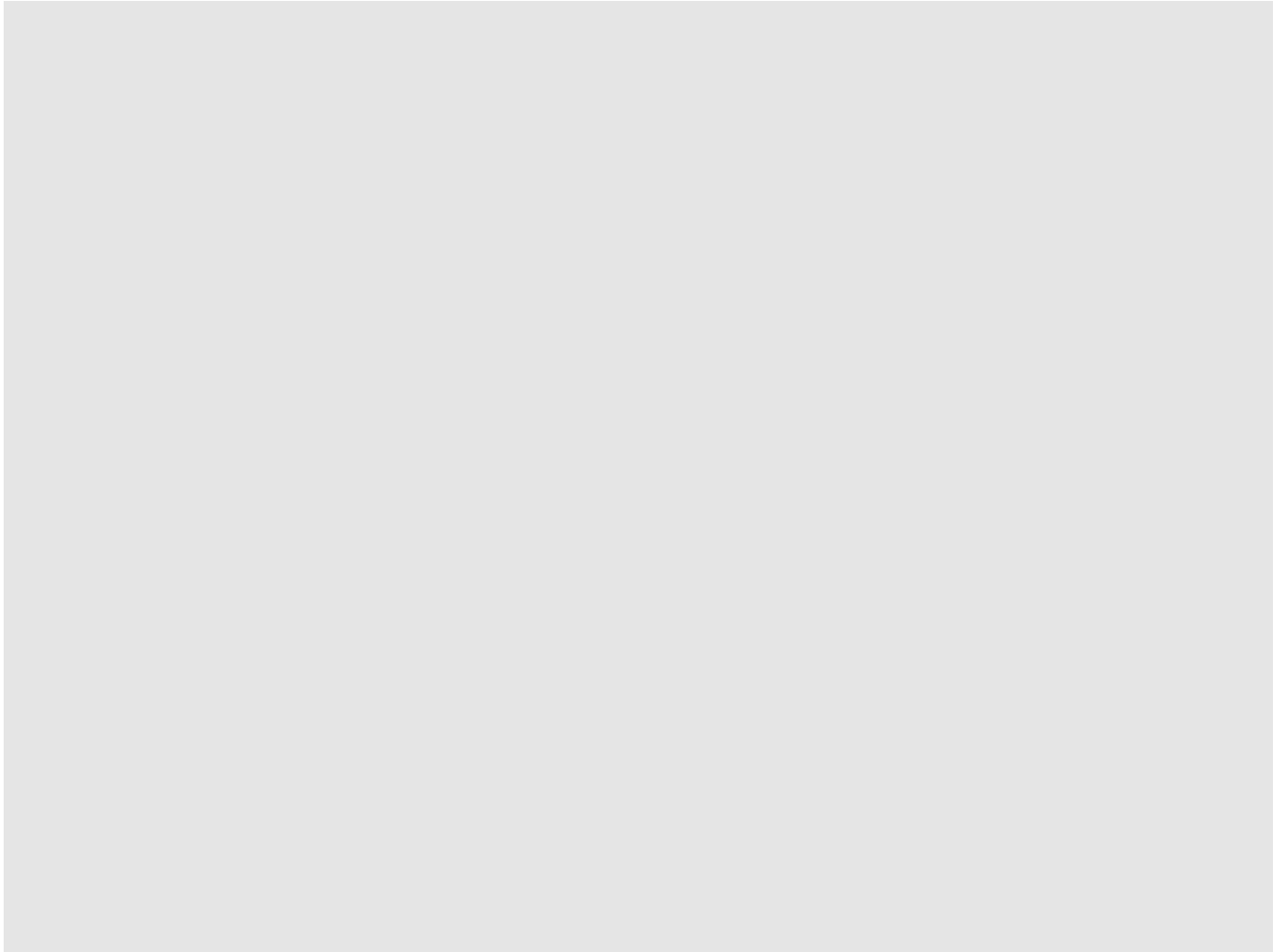
Brunelle hoping for return to USA Basketball



William Monroe High School sophomore Samantha Brunelle is working to don the red, white and blue uniform again, this time for the national U16 team.

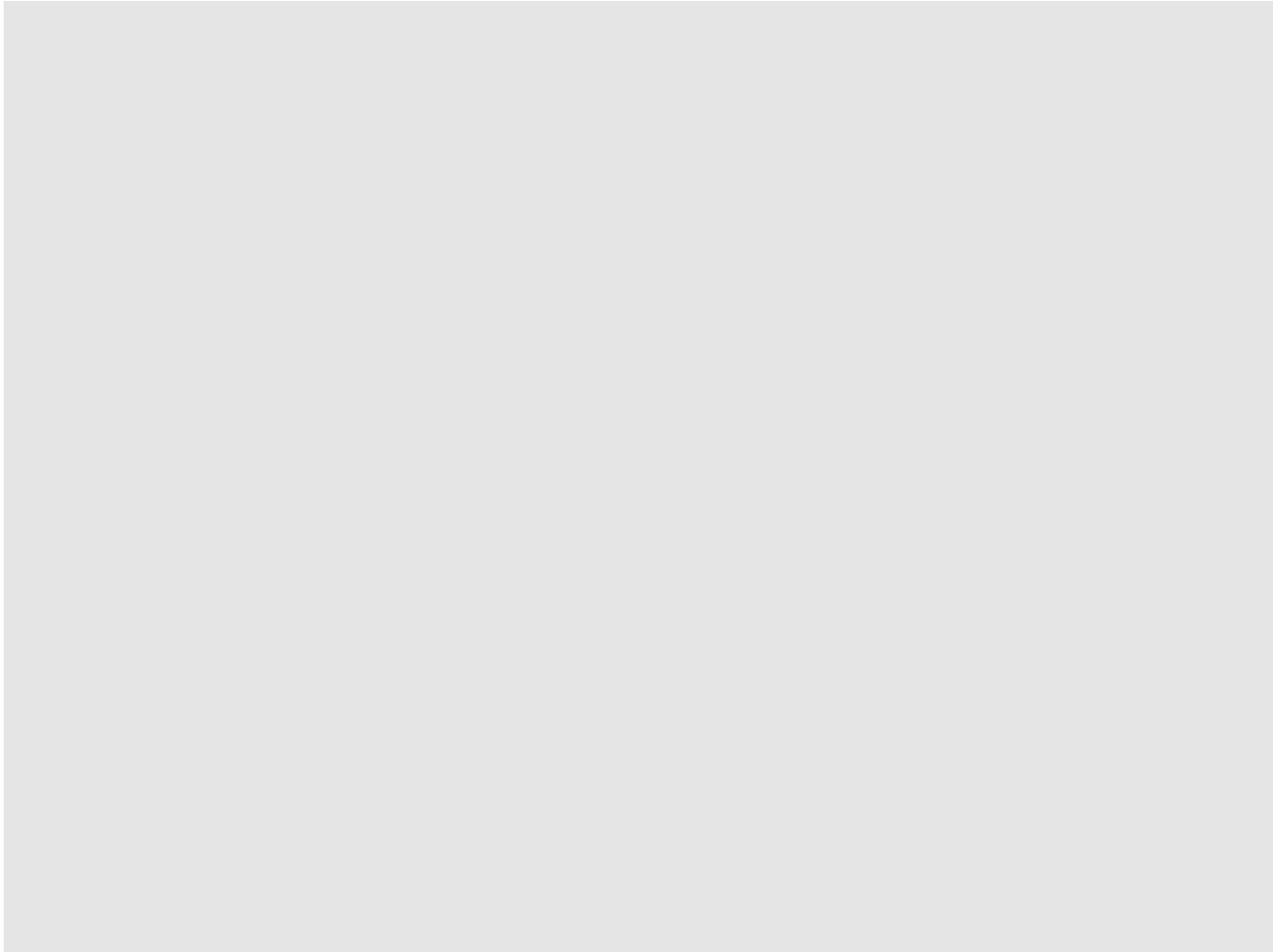
Terry Beigie

CDP 1129 william monroe310.JPG



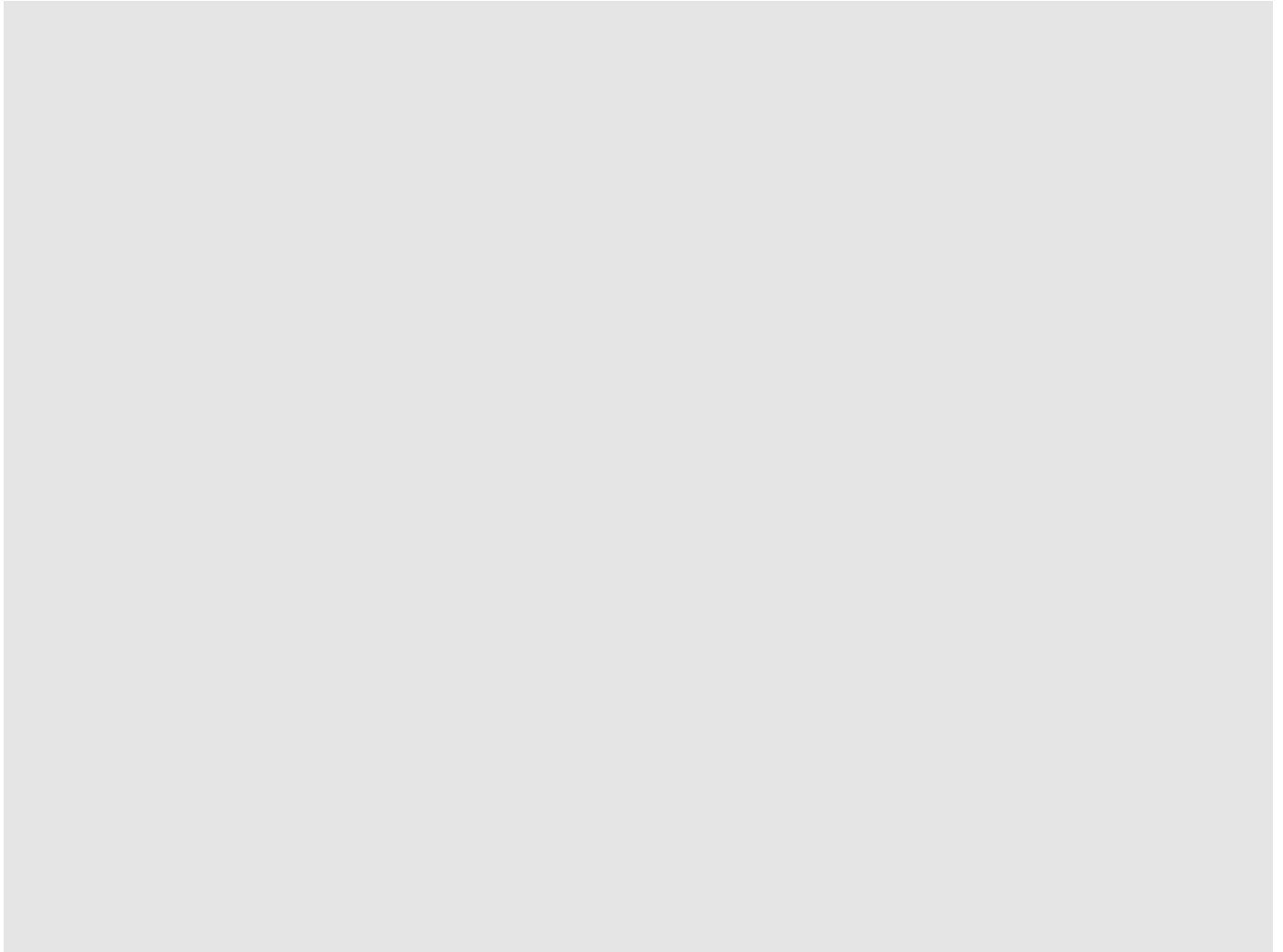
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots over Orange County's Jordan Carter (30).

CDP 1129 william monroe308.JPG



ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots over Orange County's Lindsey Slaughter (14).

CDP 1129 william monroe305.JPG



William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots over Orange County's Erin Ryder (3) Tuesday during the game.

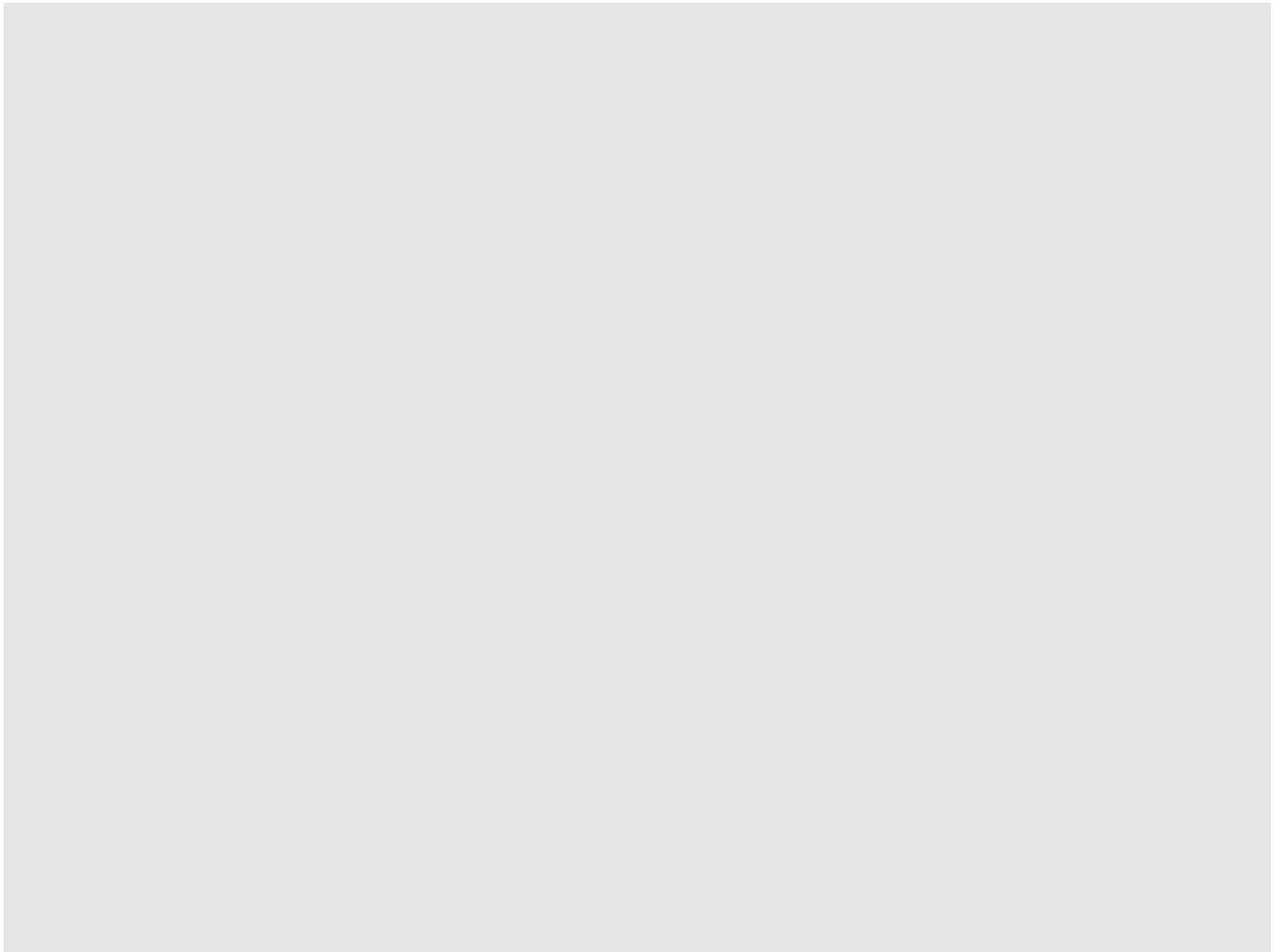
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS

CDP 1202 Monroe Girls 176.JPG



ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) celebrates a basket against Fluvanna.

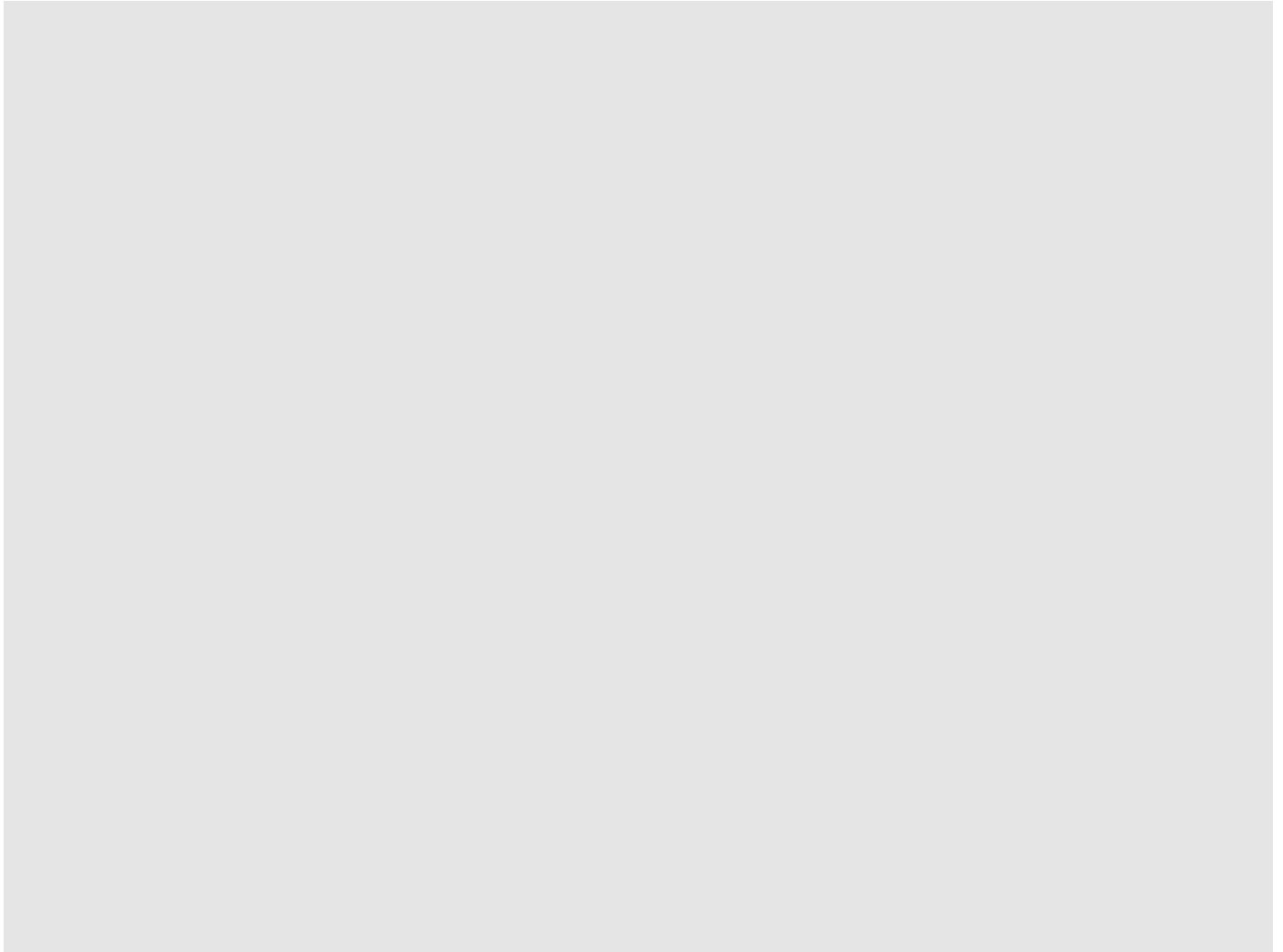
Brunelle



William Monroe basketball player Samantha Brunelle.

ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS

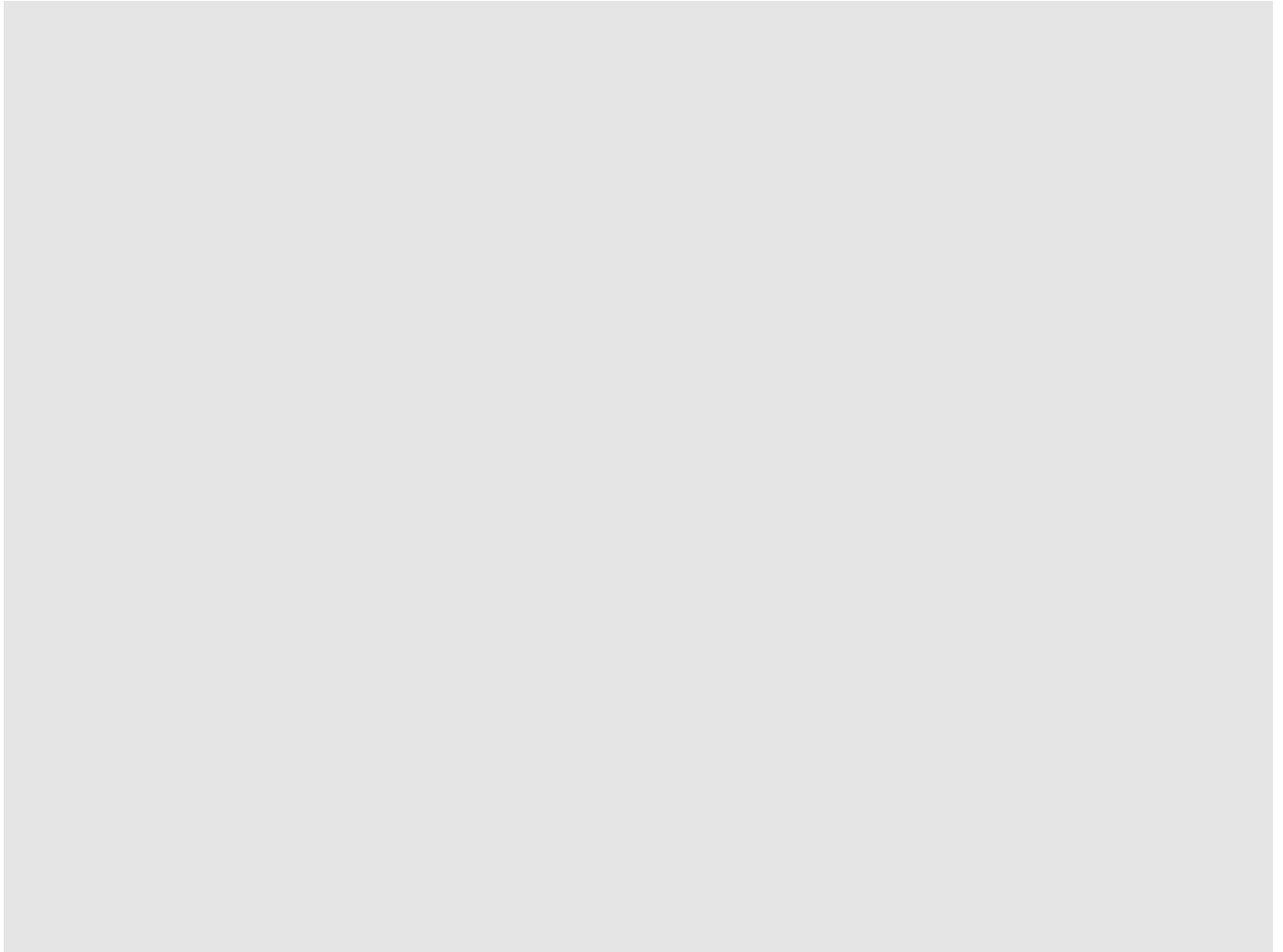
Brunelle



William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle (33) drives the lane during second half of play against Western Albemarle during the Daily Progress Holiday Hoops Classic semifinals at Albemarle High School.

MIKE INGALLS FOR THE DAILY PROGRESS

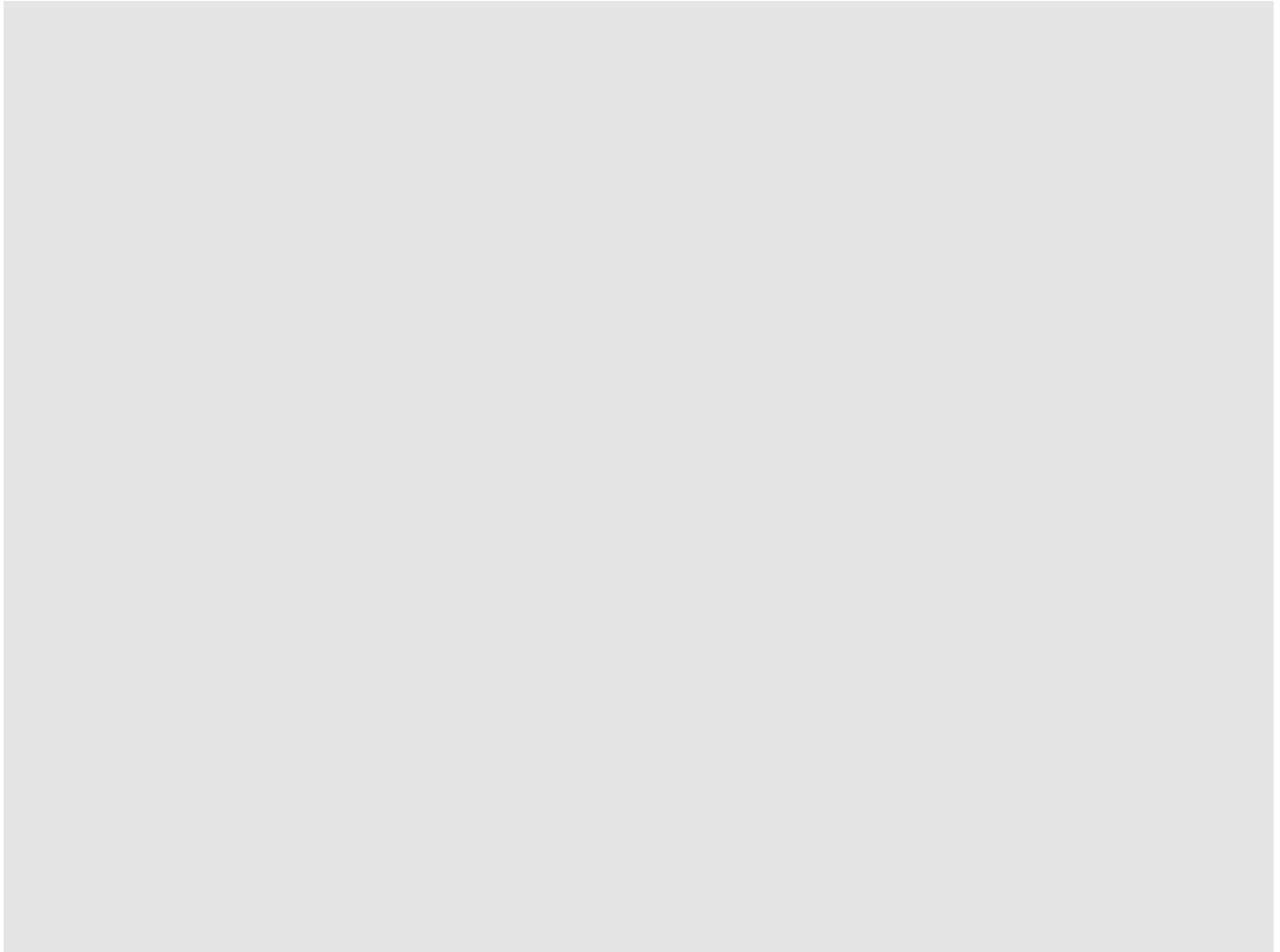
CDP 1230 HH Championship Girls 503.JPG



William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots over Albemarle's Jamie Rademacher (32) in the first half during the Holiday Hoops Classic girl's championship game on Friday.

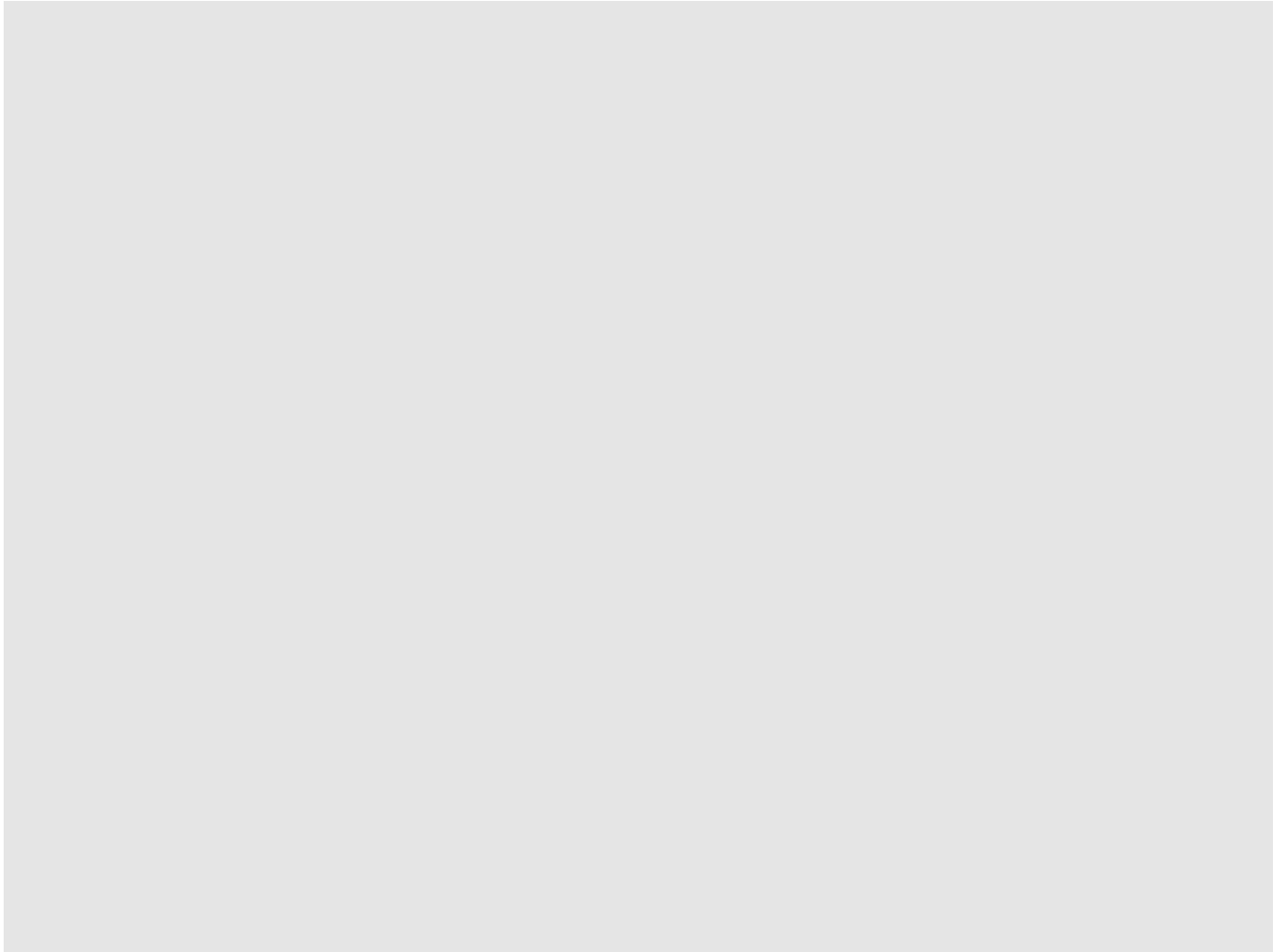
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS

CDP 1230 HH Championship Girls 498.JPG



ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) looks to pass at the top of the key against Albemarle in the first half during the Holiday Hoops Classic girl's championship game on Friday.

Dragons reach finals behind Sam Brunelle's points, assists



The William Monroe girls basketball team celebrates winning the Daily Progress Holiday Hoops classic after beating Albemarle, 59-23, at Western Albemarle High School.

PHOTOS BY ZACK WAJSGRAS THE DAILY PROGRESS

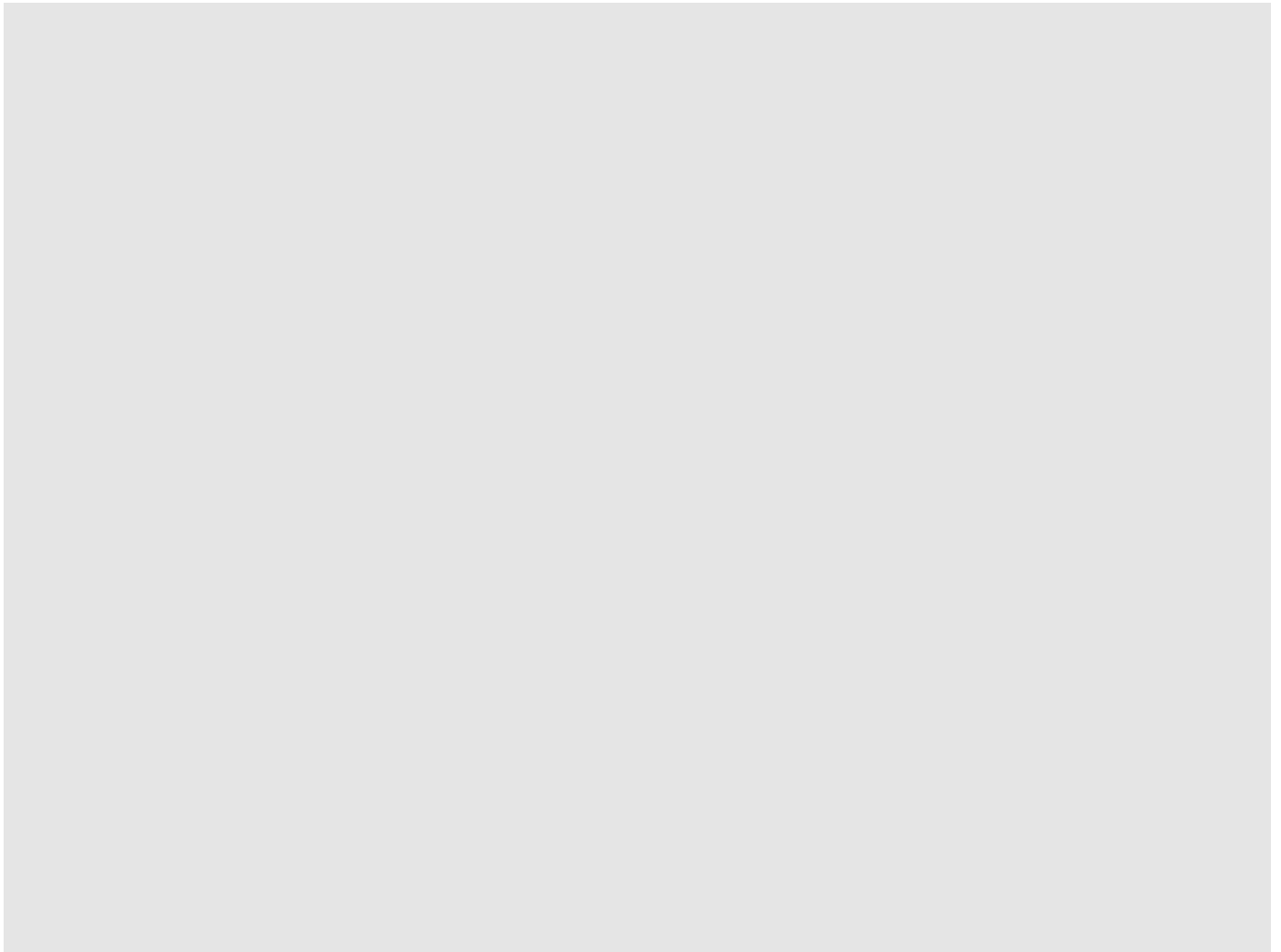
William Monroe wins championship



The William Monroe girls basketball team celebrates winning The Daily Progress Holiday Hoops classic after beating Albemarle, 59-23, at Western Albemarle High School last Friday

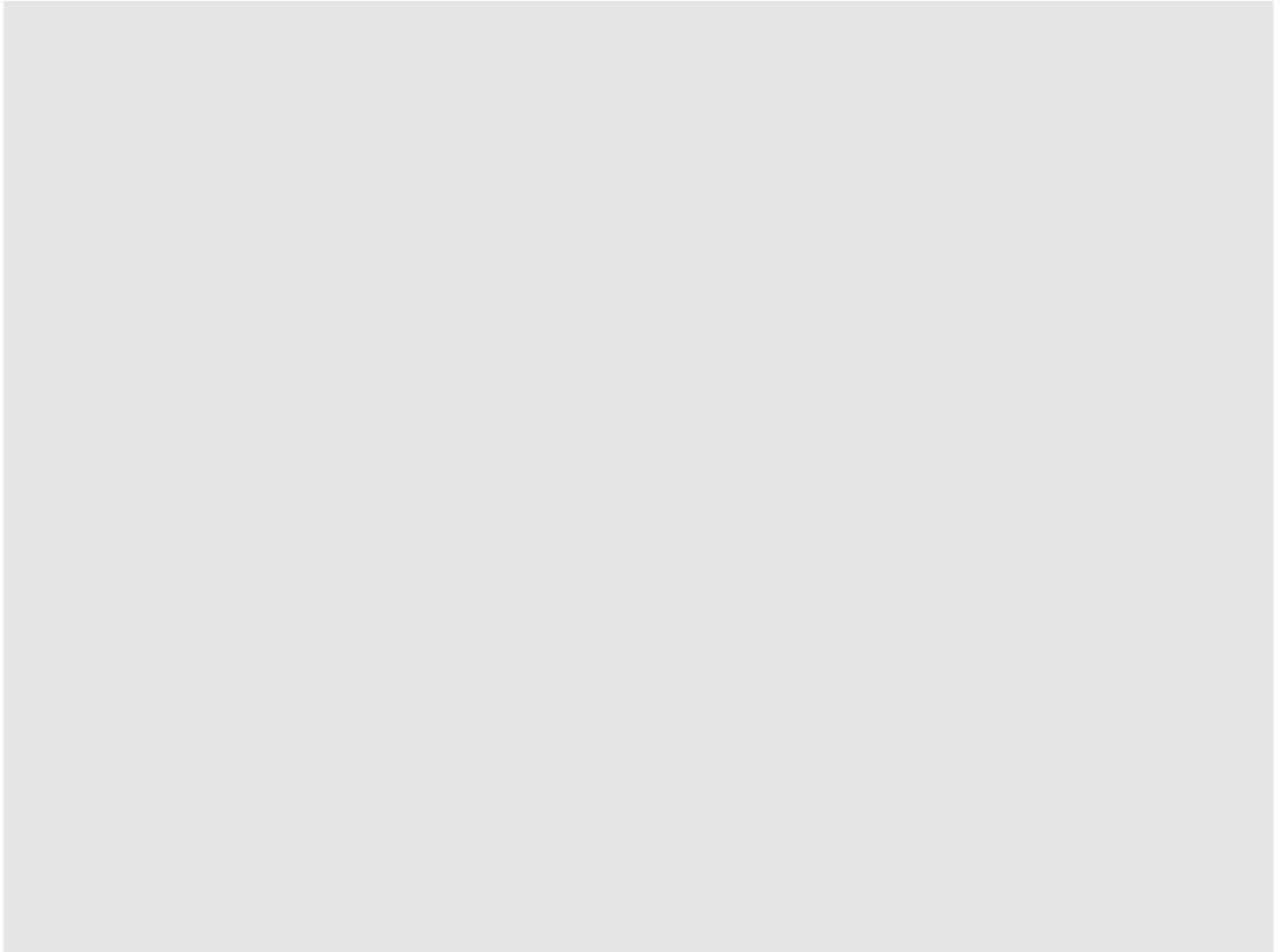
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William Monroe wins championship



The William Monroe girls basketball team poses for a photo after winning the Holiday Hoops Classic over Albemarle.

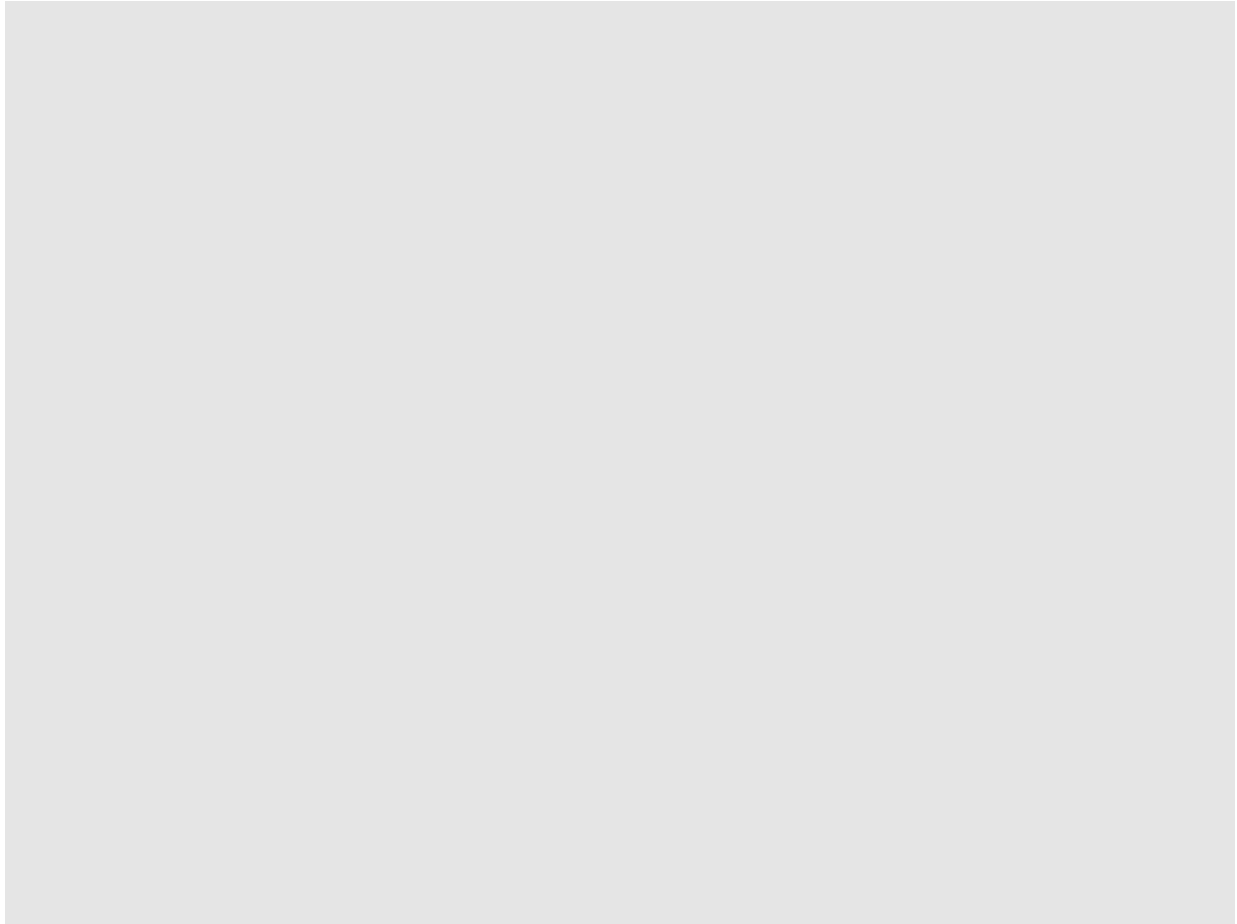
Brunelle



William Monroe forward Samantha Brunelle (33) works in the low post against Culpeper guard Tatyana Loney (21) during Tuesday night's game at William Monroe High School. Brunelle scored 40 points in a 54-37 victory.

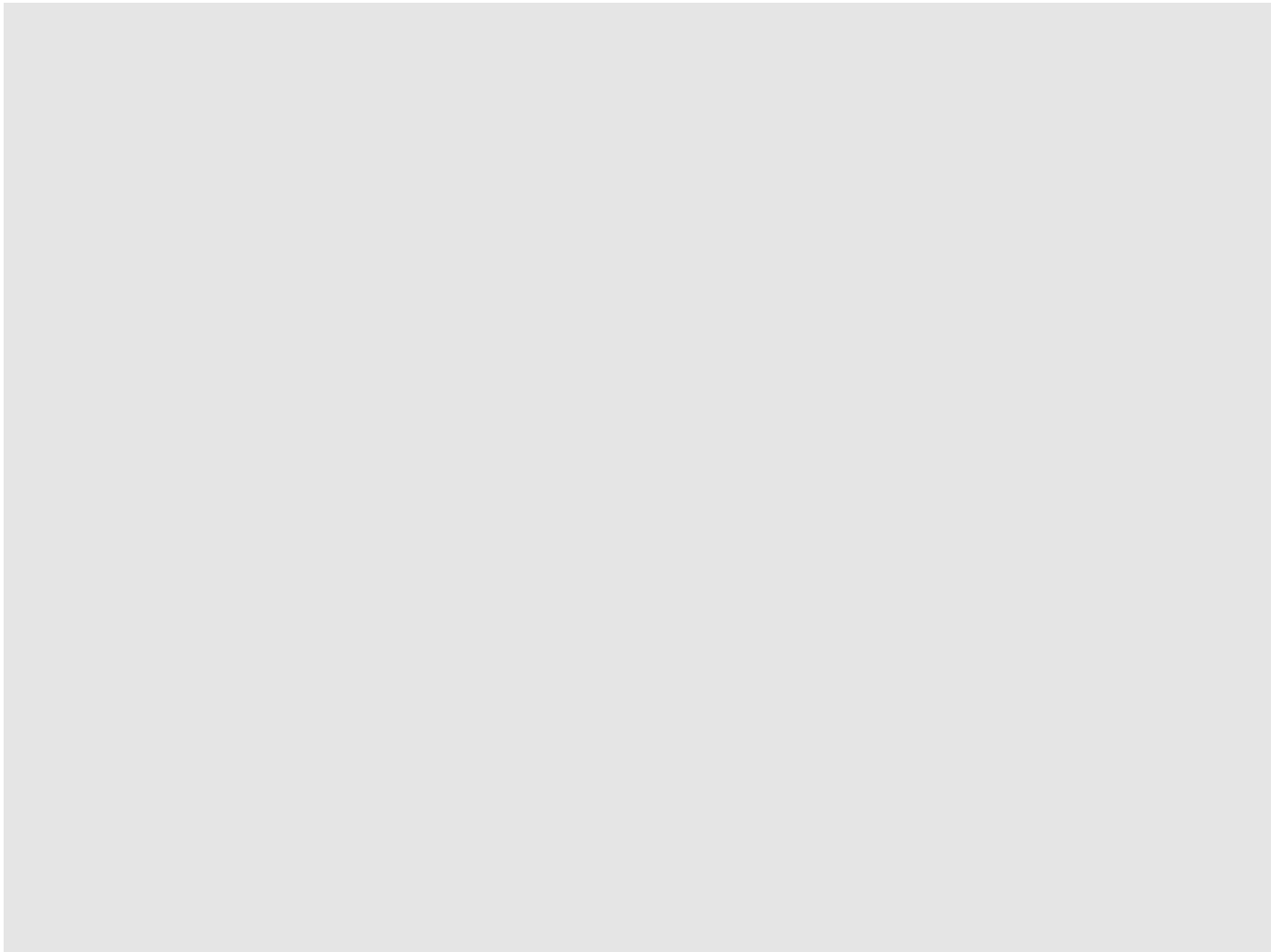
GREG VANNOSTRAND/FOR THE STAR-EXPONENT

William Monroe remains undefeated



William Monroe forward Samantha Brunelle finished with 39 points and 23 rebounds in Saturday's victory over Wilson Memorial in the second annual Play for Preemies Showcase.

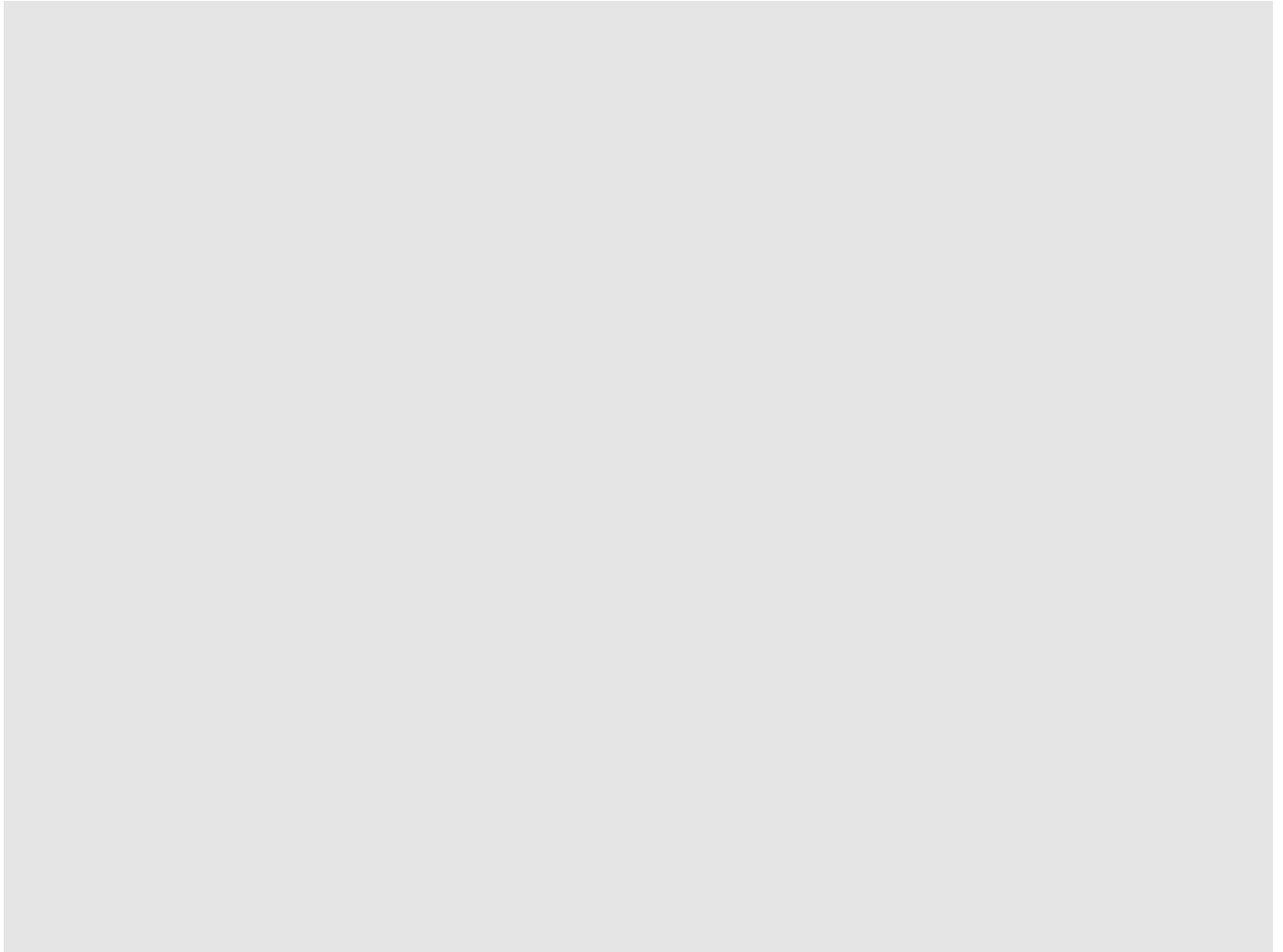
Brunelle



William Monroe forward Samantha Brunelle (33) rises for a shot over Culpeper Laila Glymph during Friday's contest at CCHS> Brunelle dropped a season-high 49 points in the 62-45 victory.

STEPHANIE OLINGER/FOR THE STAR-EXPONENT

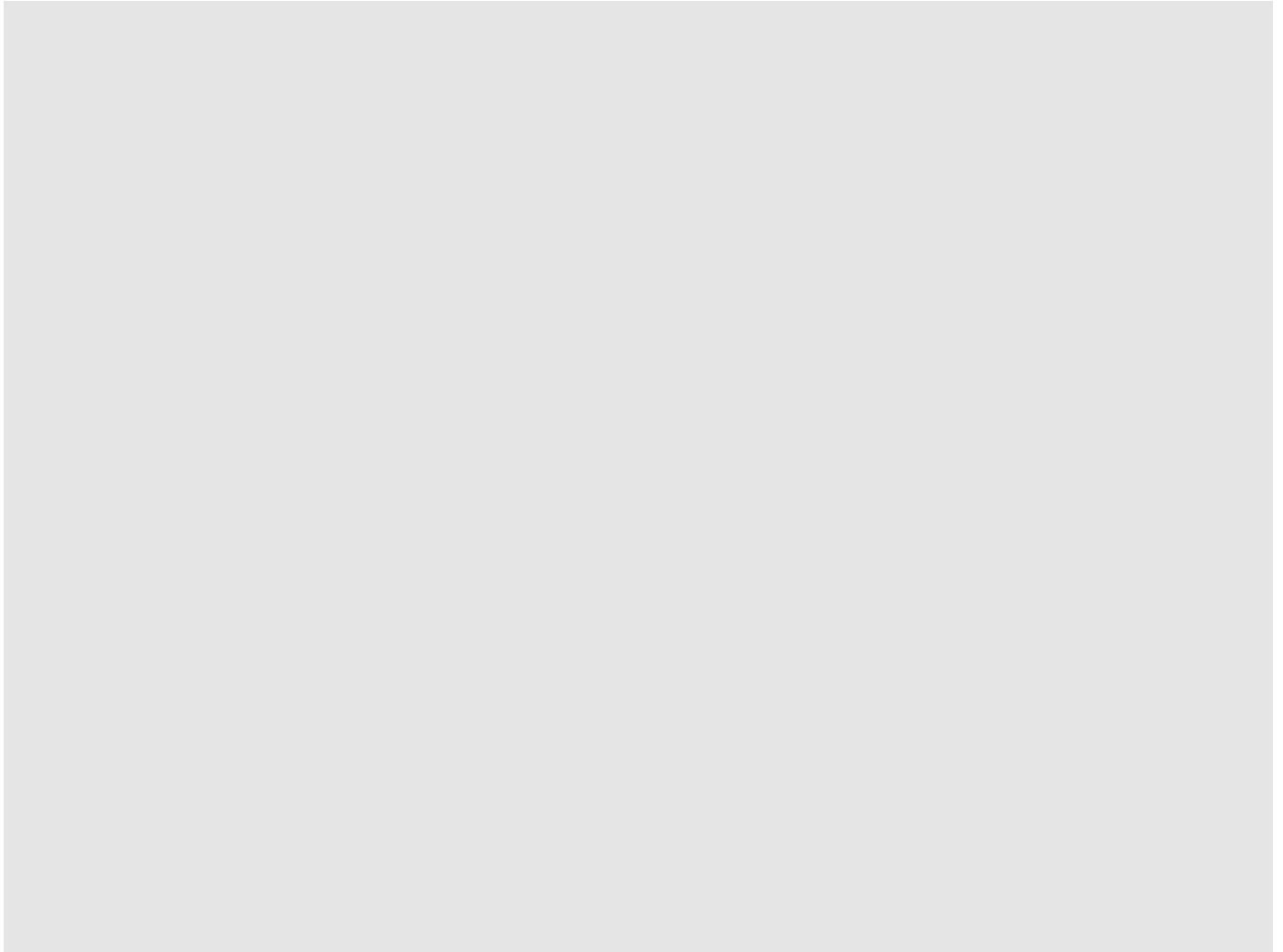
Brunelle



William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle is the 2017-18 Central Virginia Girls Basketball Player of the Year.

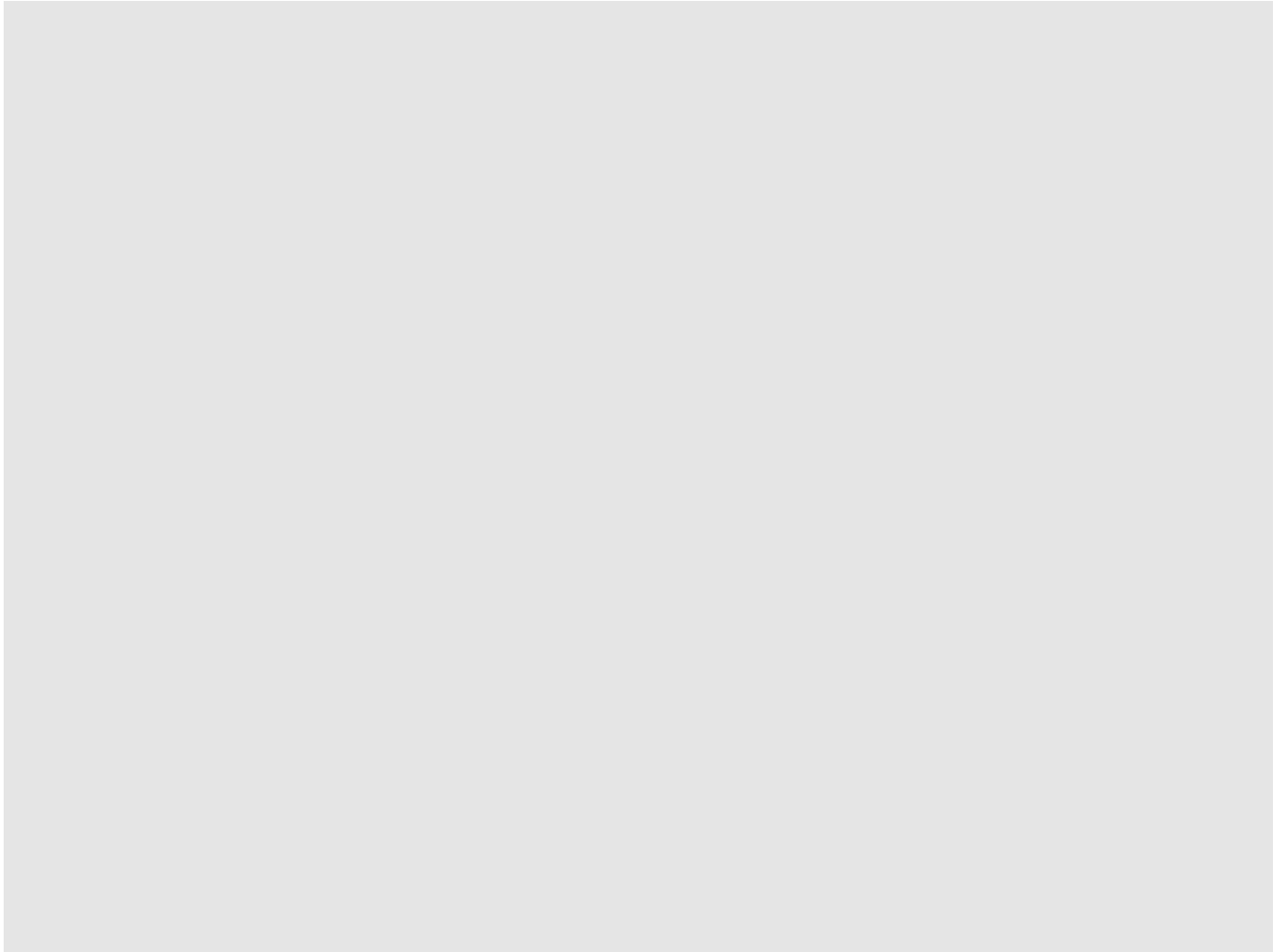
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CDP 0416 Brunelle298.jpg



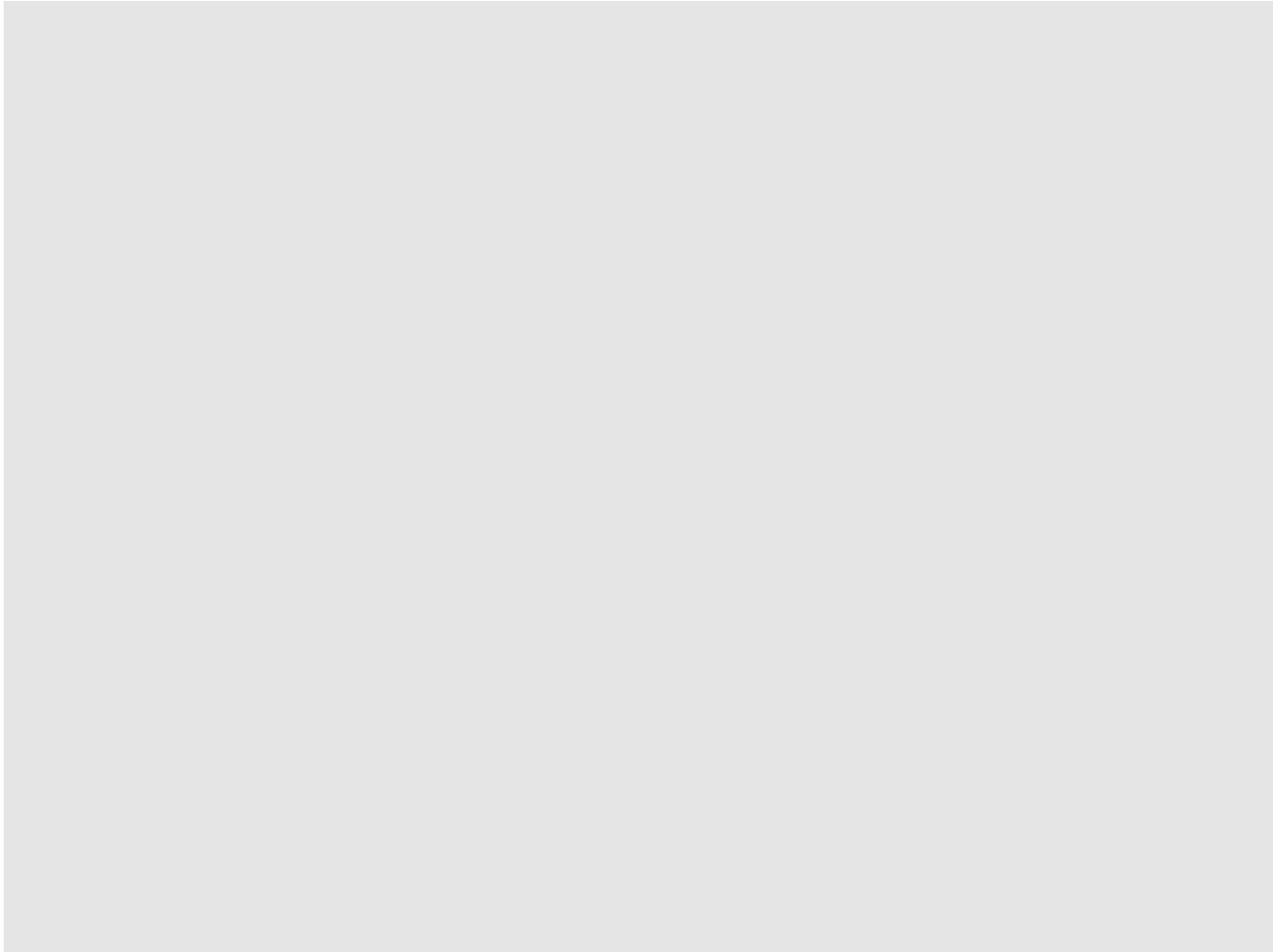
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS Katie Beale (bottom) takes a picture with William Monroe basketball star Samantha Brunelle after she announced she's headed to Notre Dame Sunday in front of a large crowd at William Monroe High School.

CDP 0416 Brunelle297.jpg



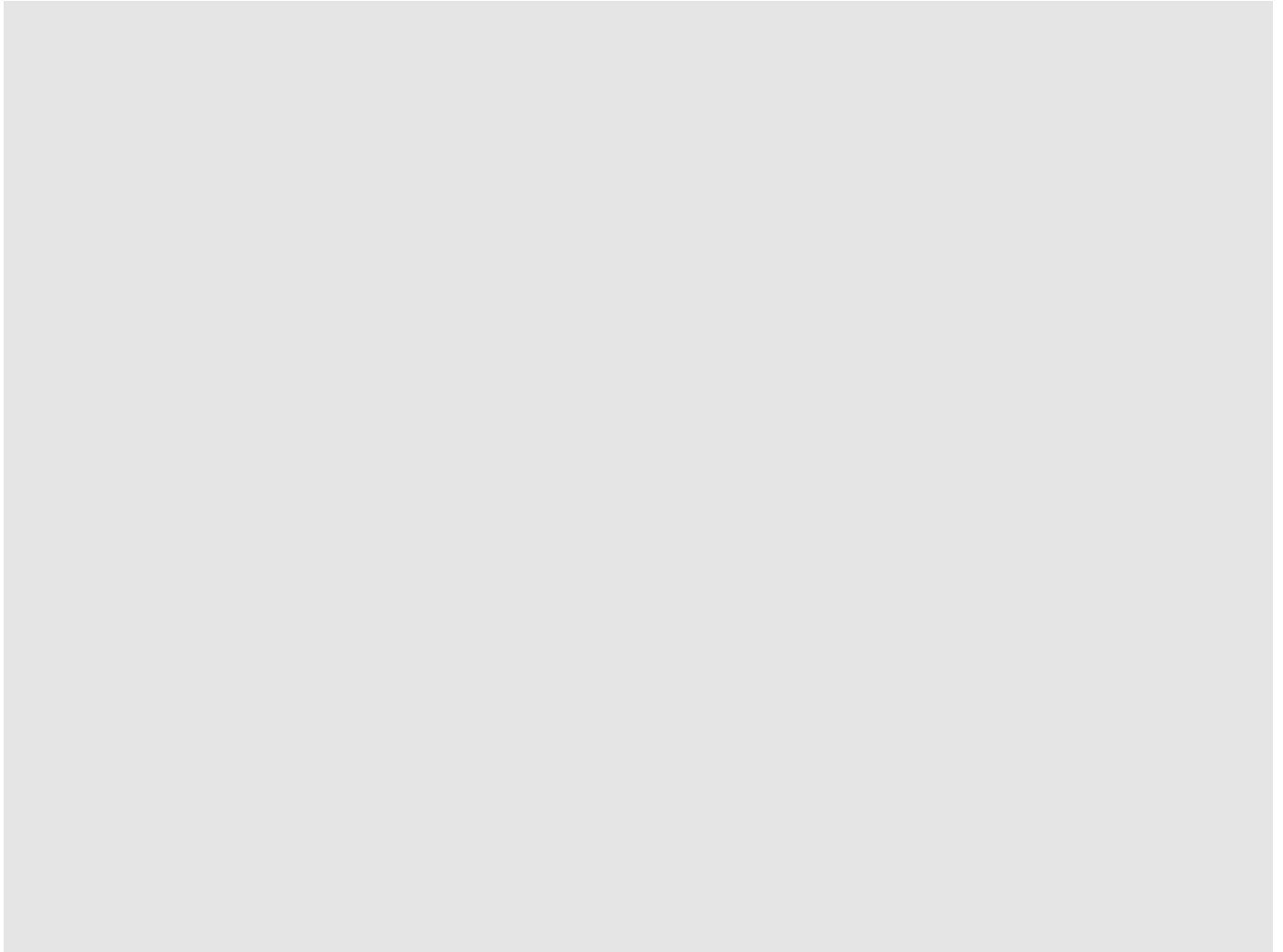
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS Emily Pickett (left) takes a selfie with William Monroe basketball star Samantha Brunelle after she announced she's headed to Notre Dame Sunday in front of a large crowd at William Monroe High School.

CDP 0416 Brunelle296.jpg



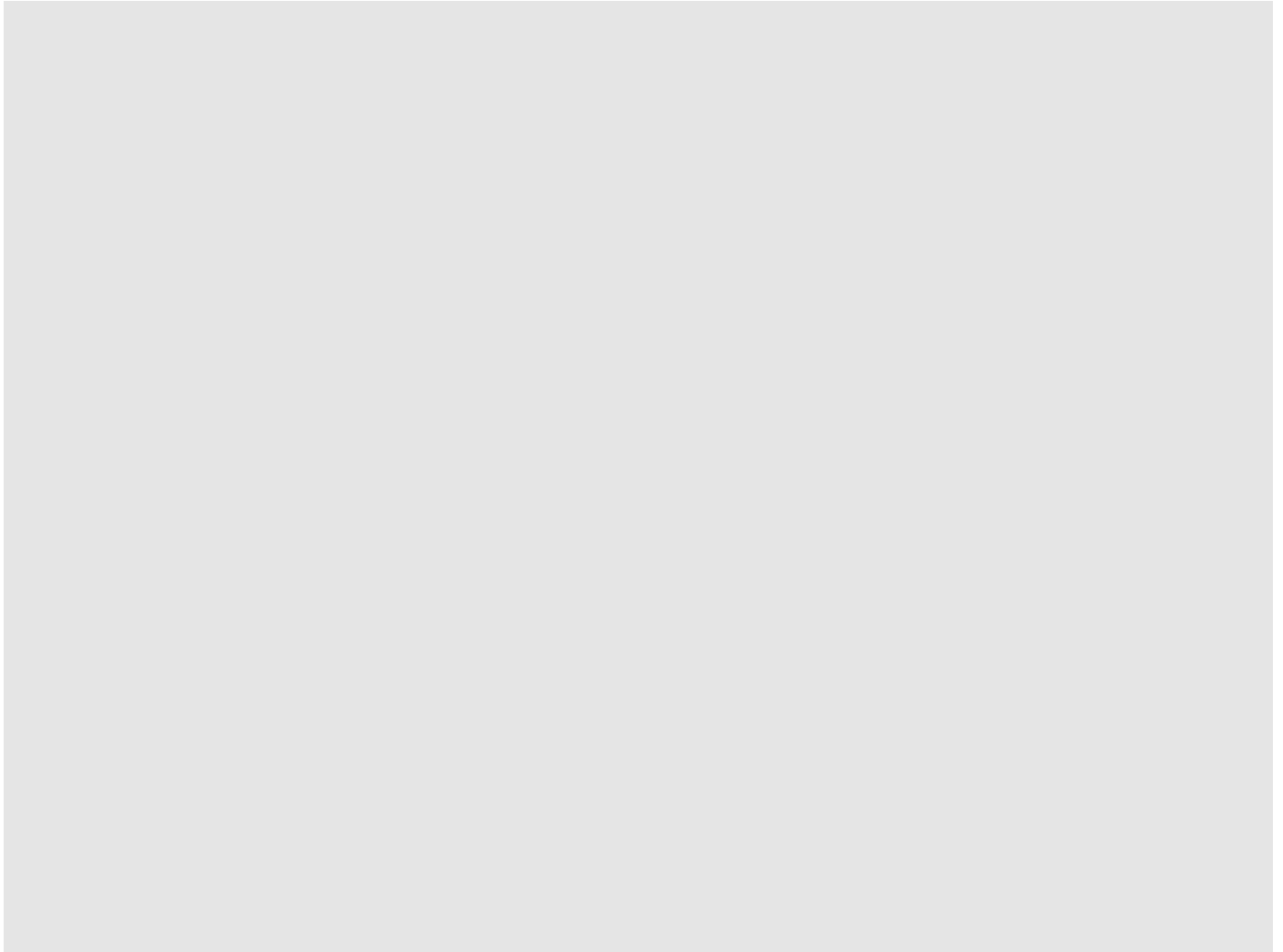
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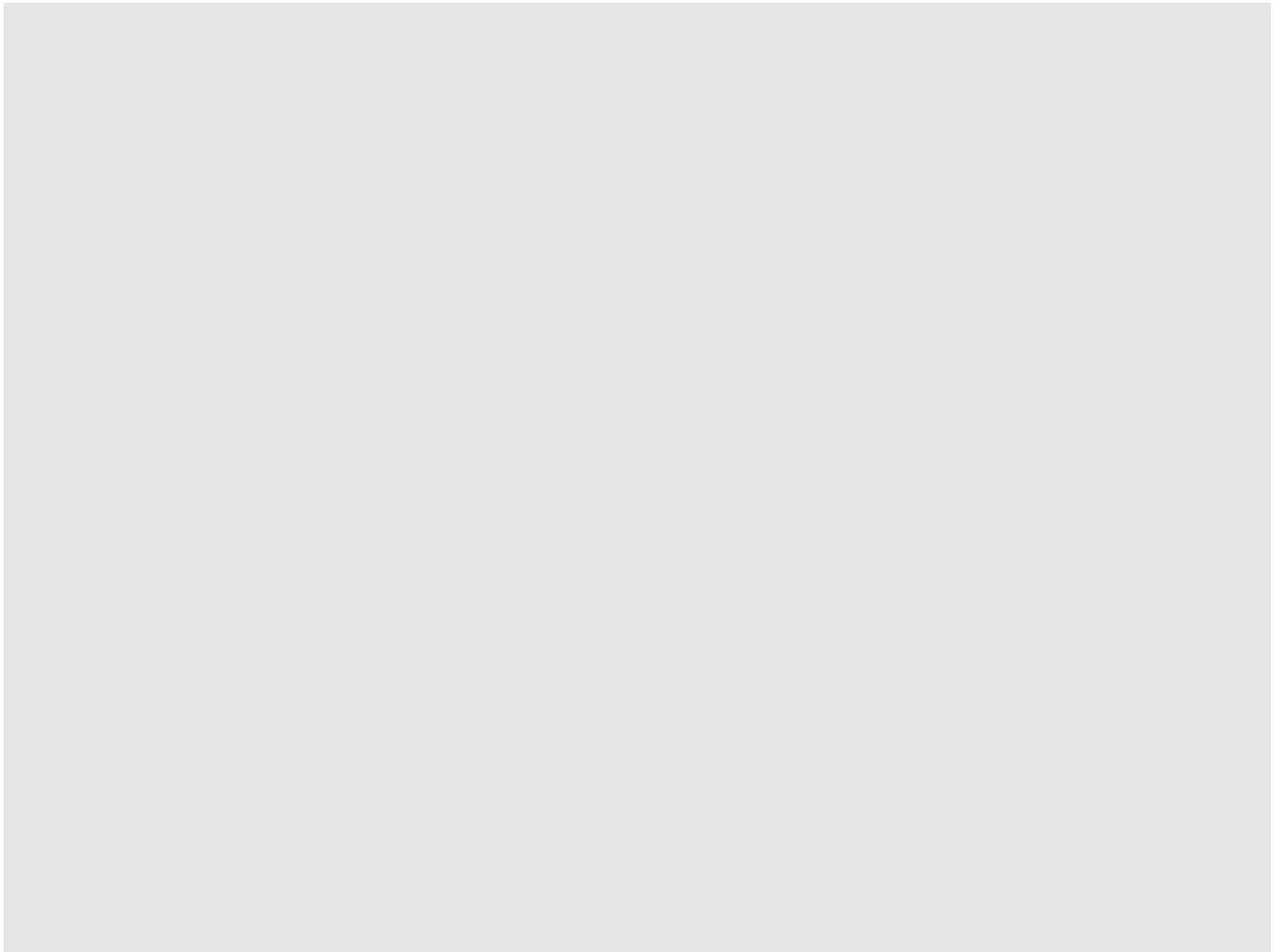
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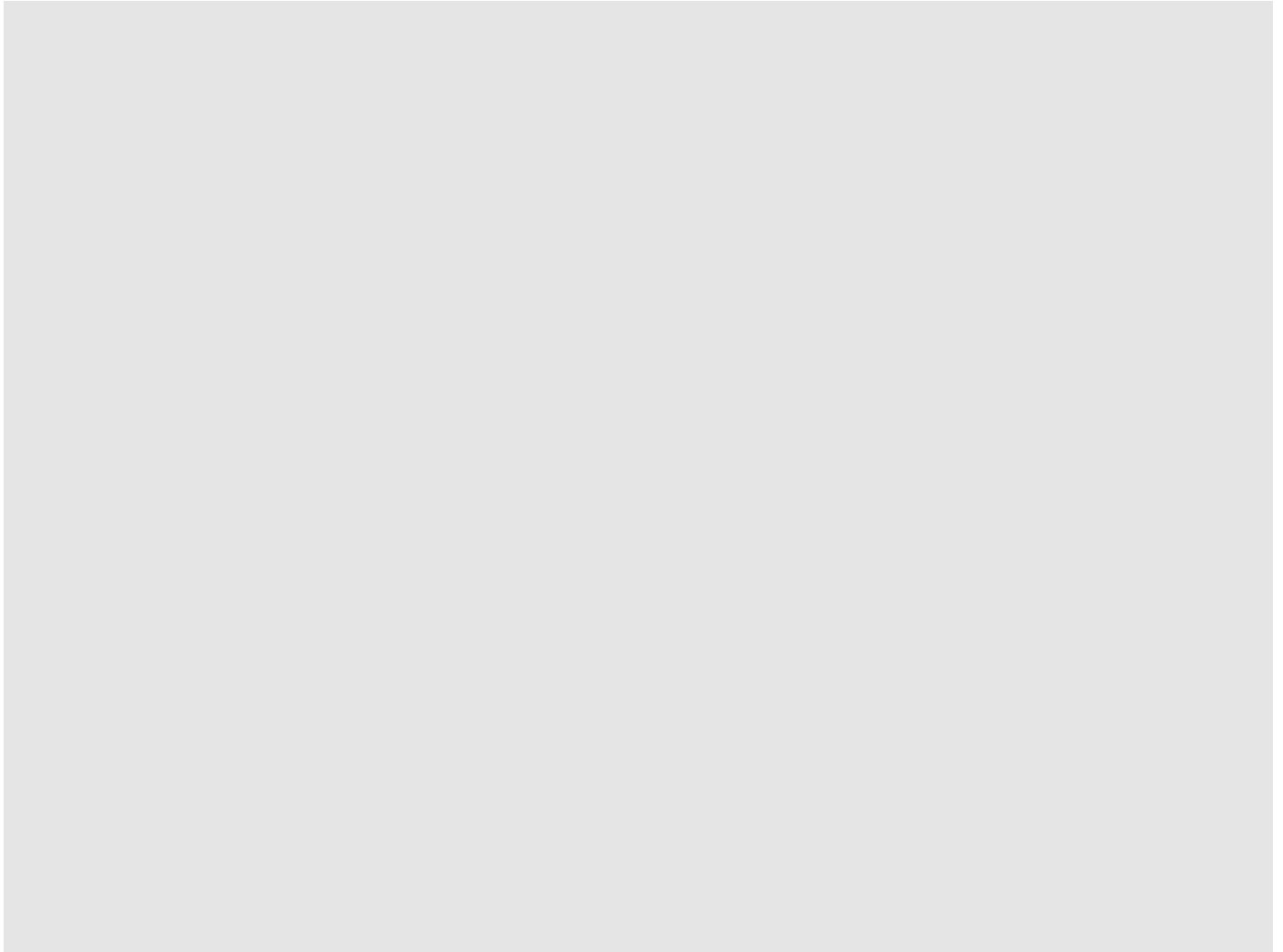
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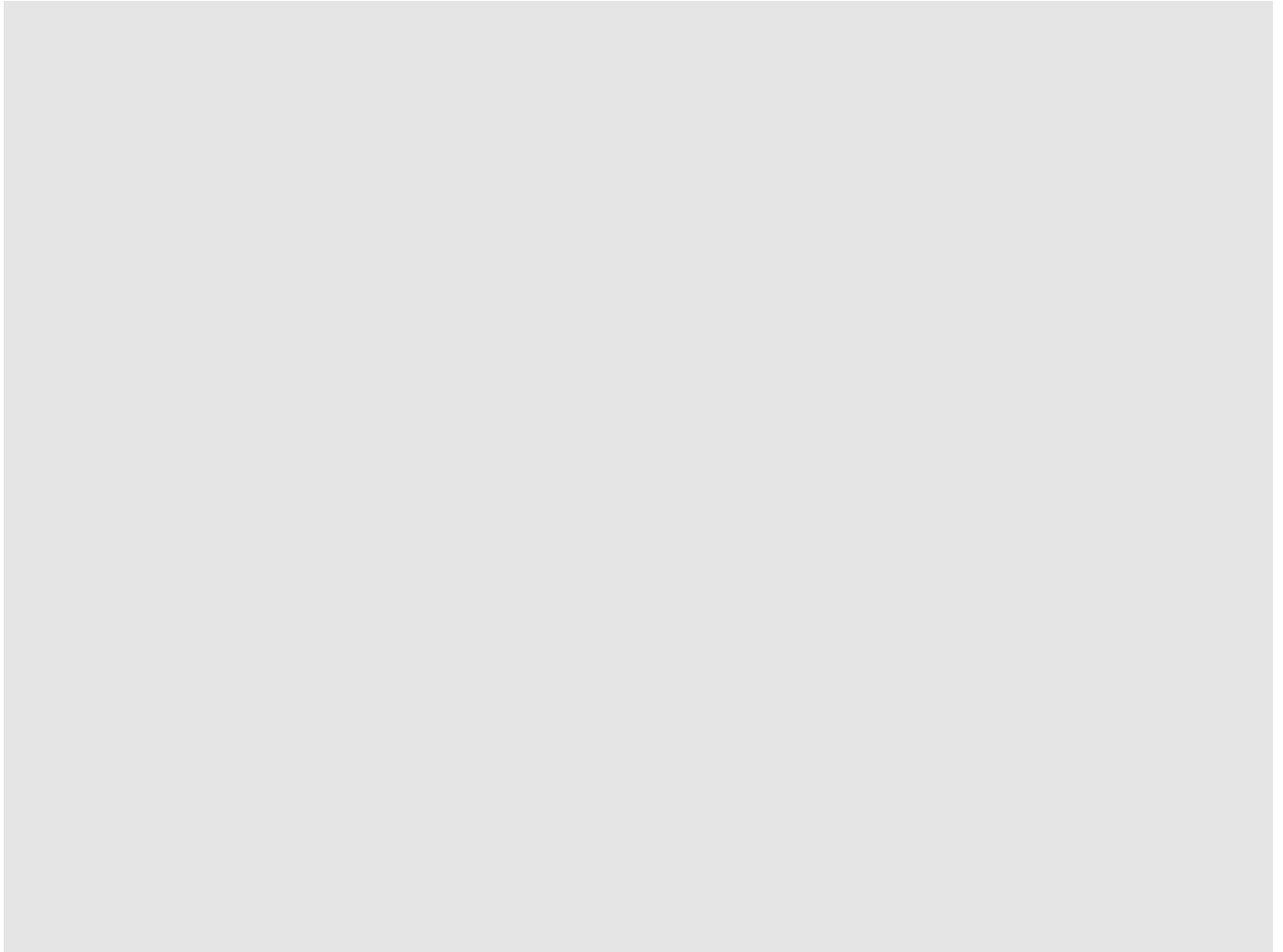
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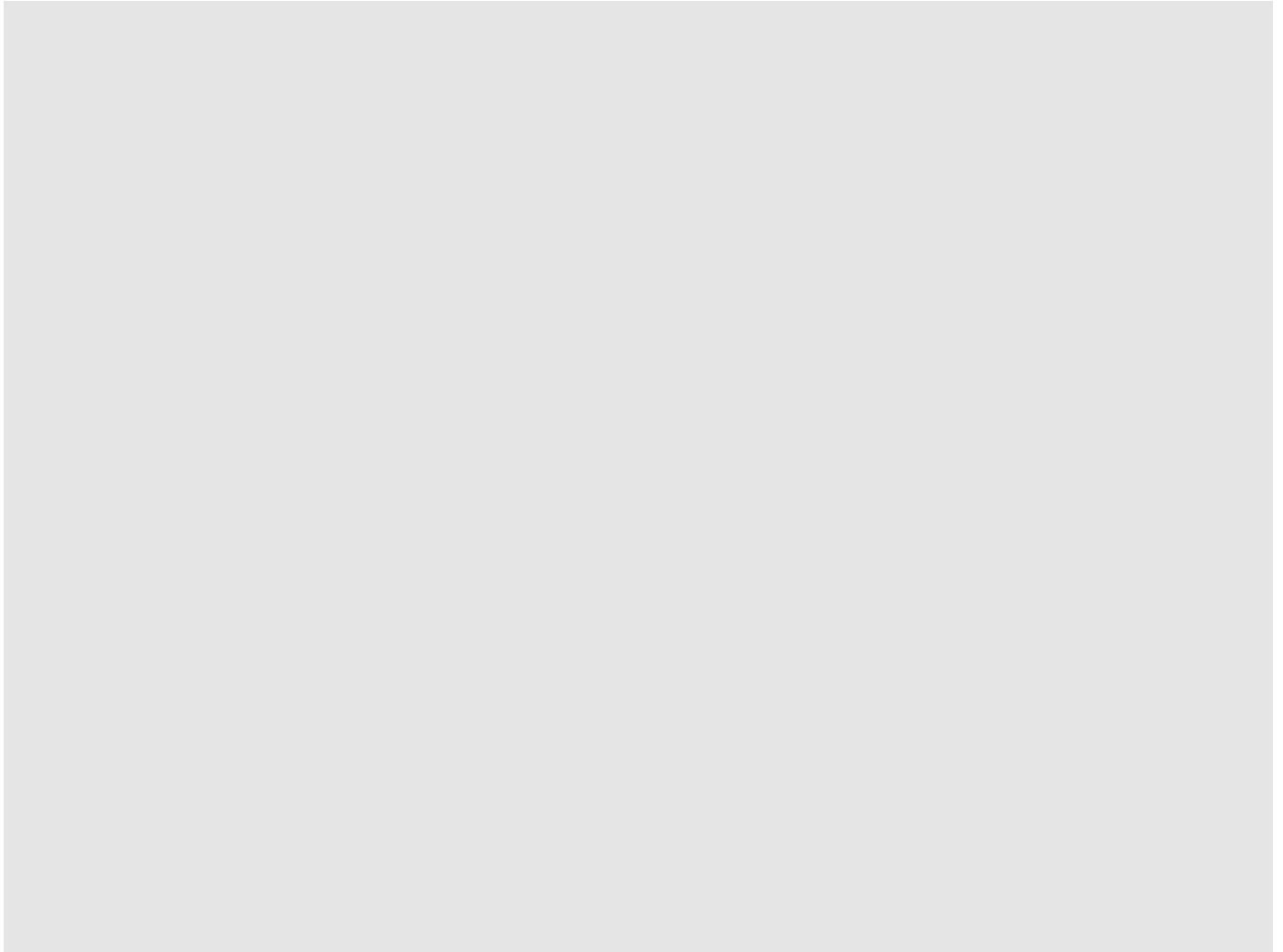
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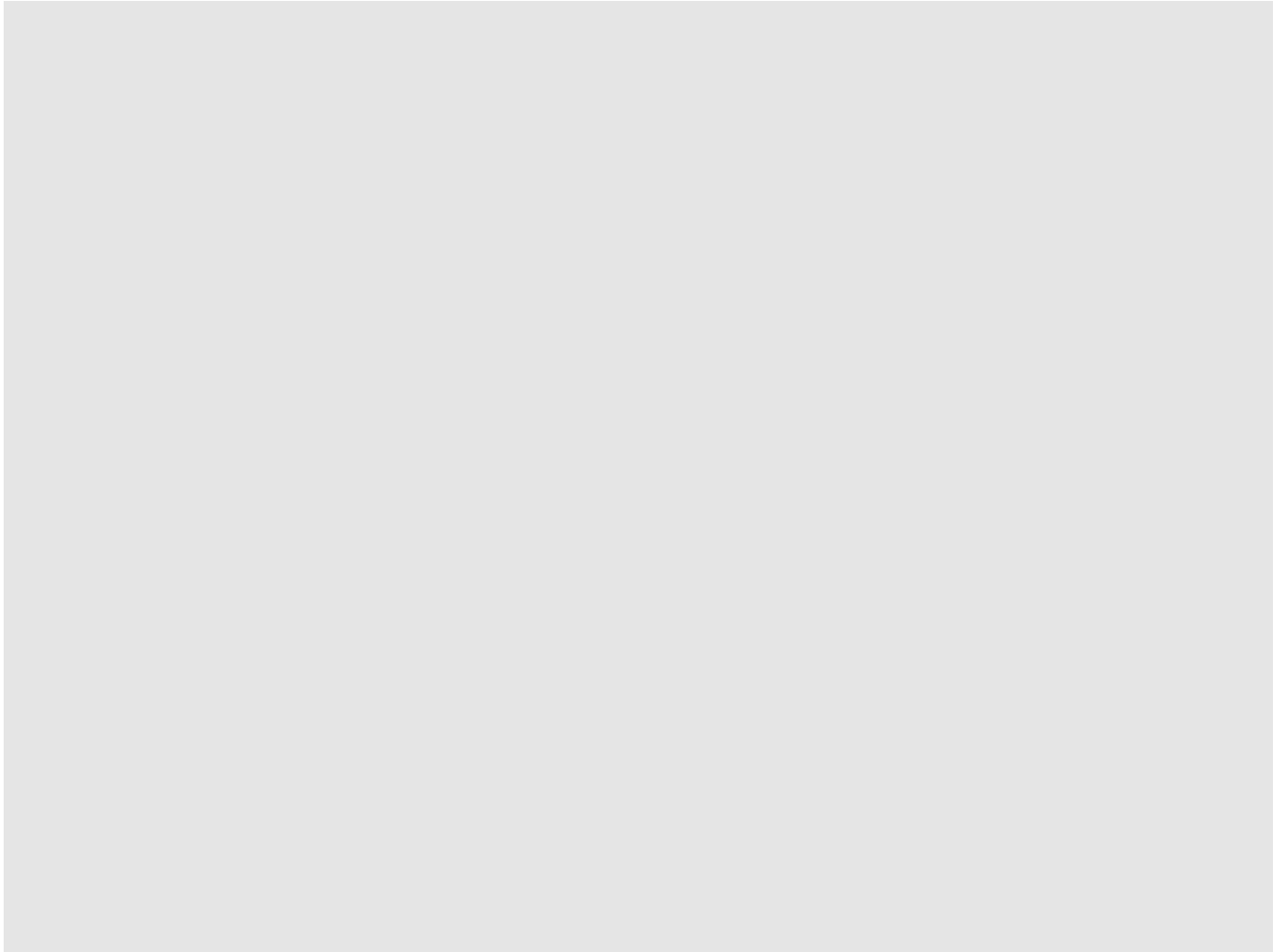
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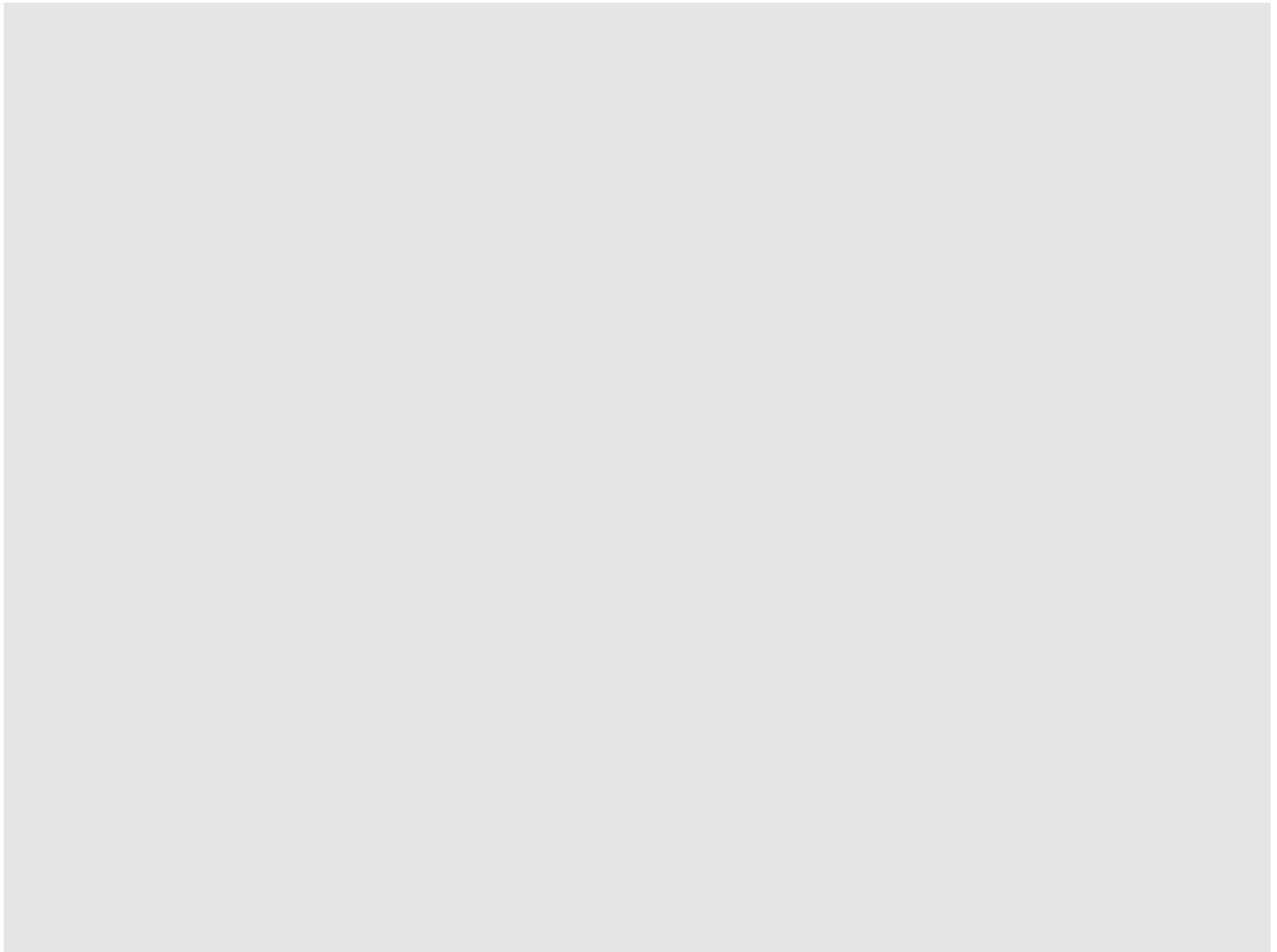
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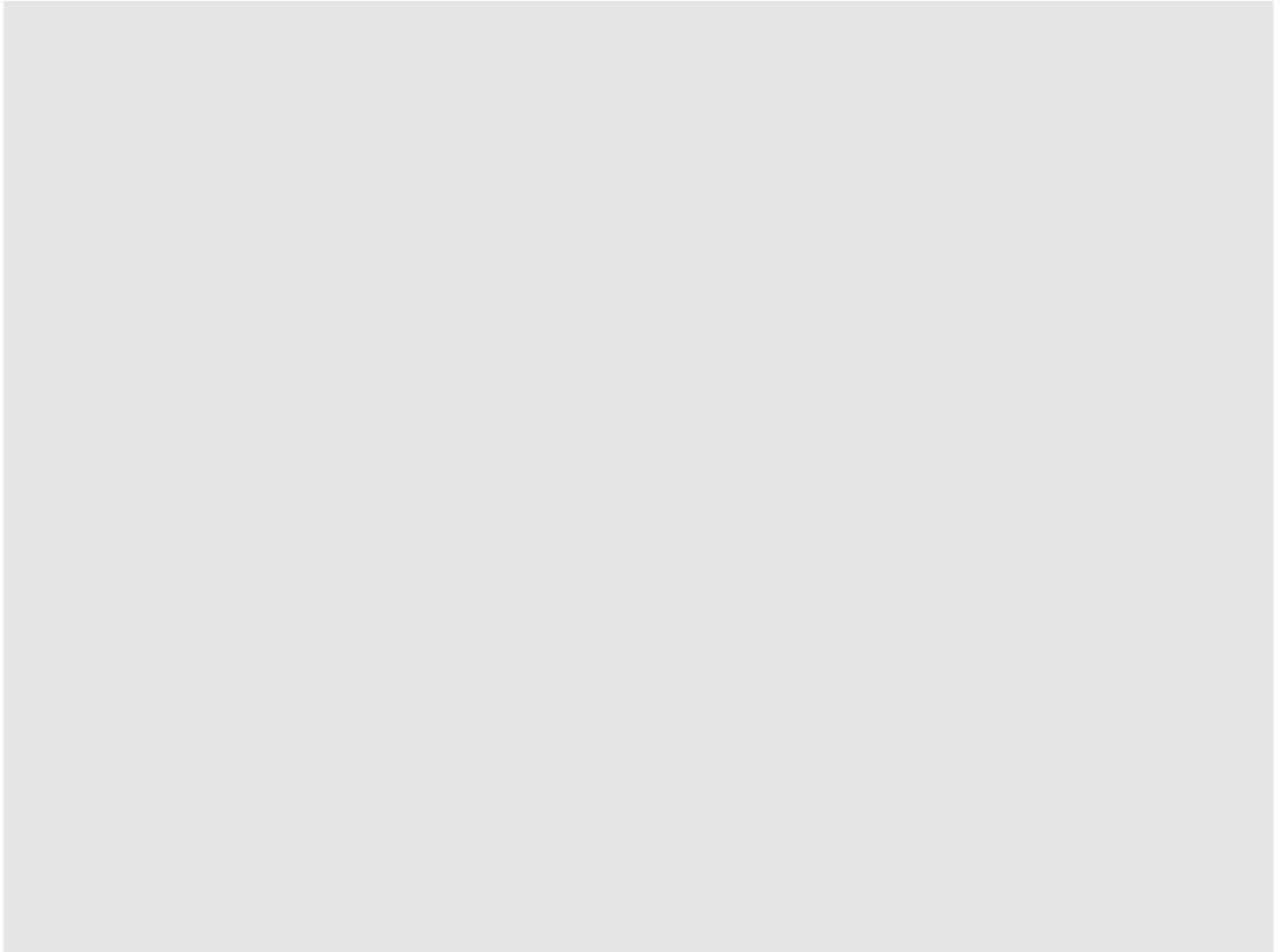
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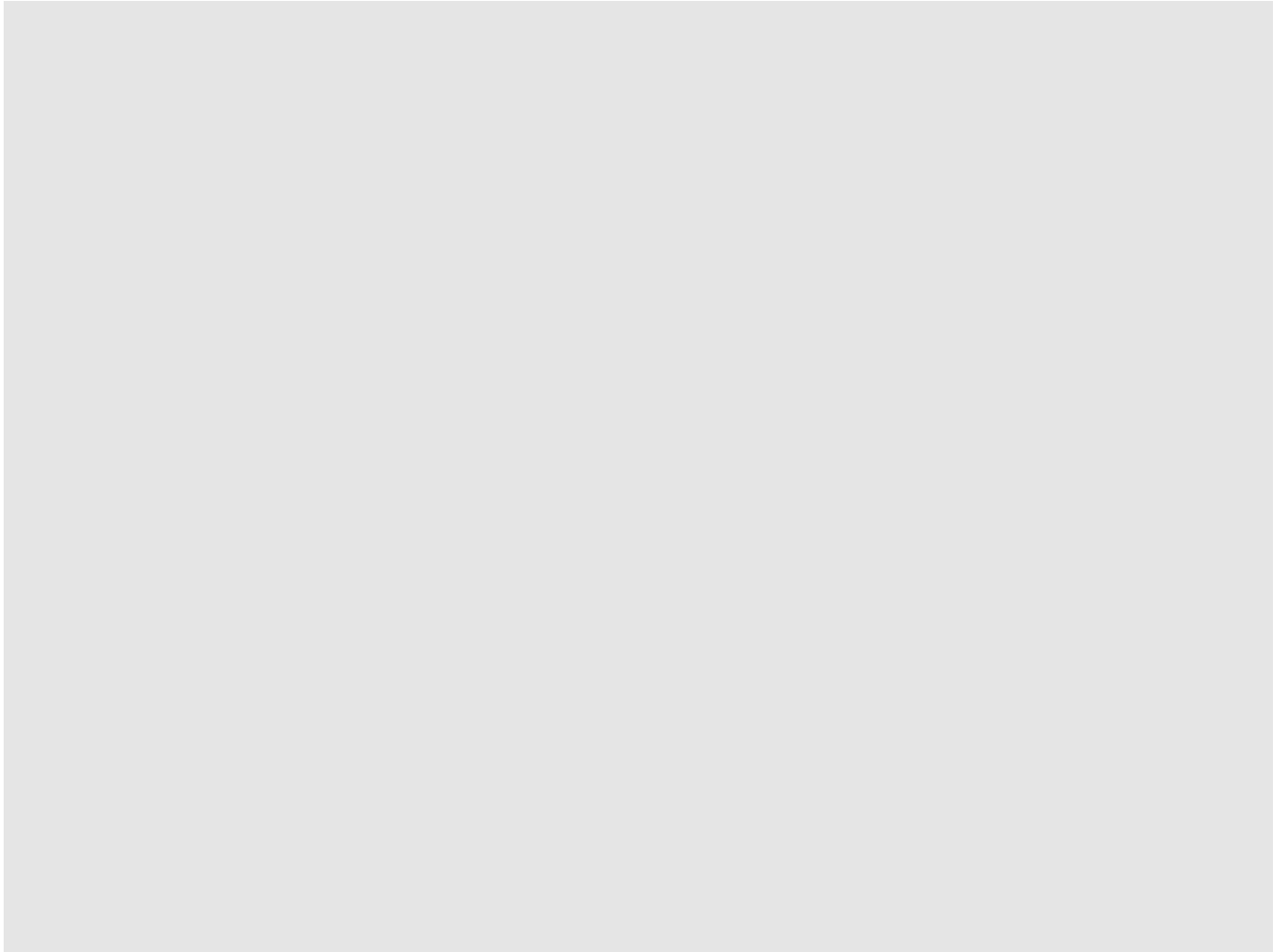
BRUNELLE BRINGS HOME GOLD – AGAIN!



Basketball phenom Samantha Brunelle poses with Riley Rocha and Landon McDaniel as the Greene County community welcomed her home Monday night after her gold-medal run at the FIBA U17 World Championships in Belarus. She earned her first gold medal on the U17 team last summer. Brunelle, committed to Notre Dame in 2019, is the number-one ranked recruit from her graduating class in the United States.

Photo by Brian Mellott/For the Greene County Record

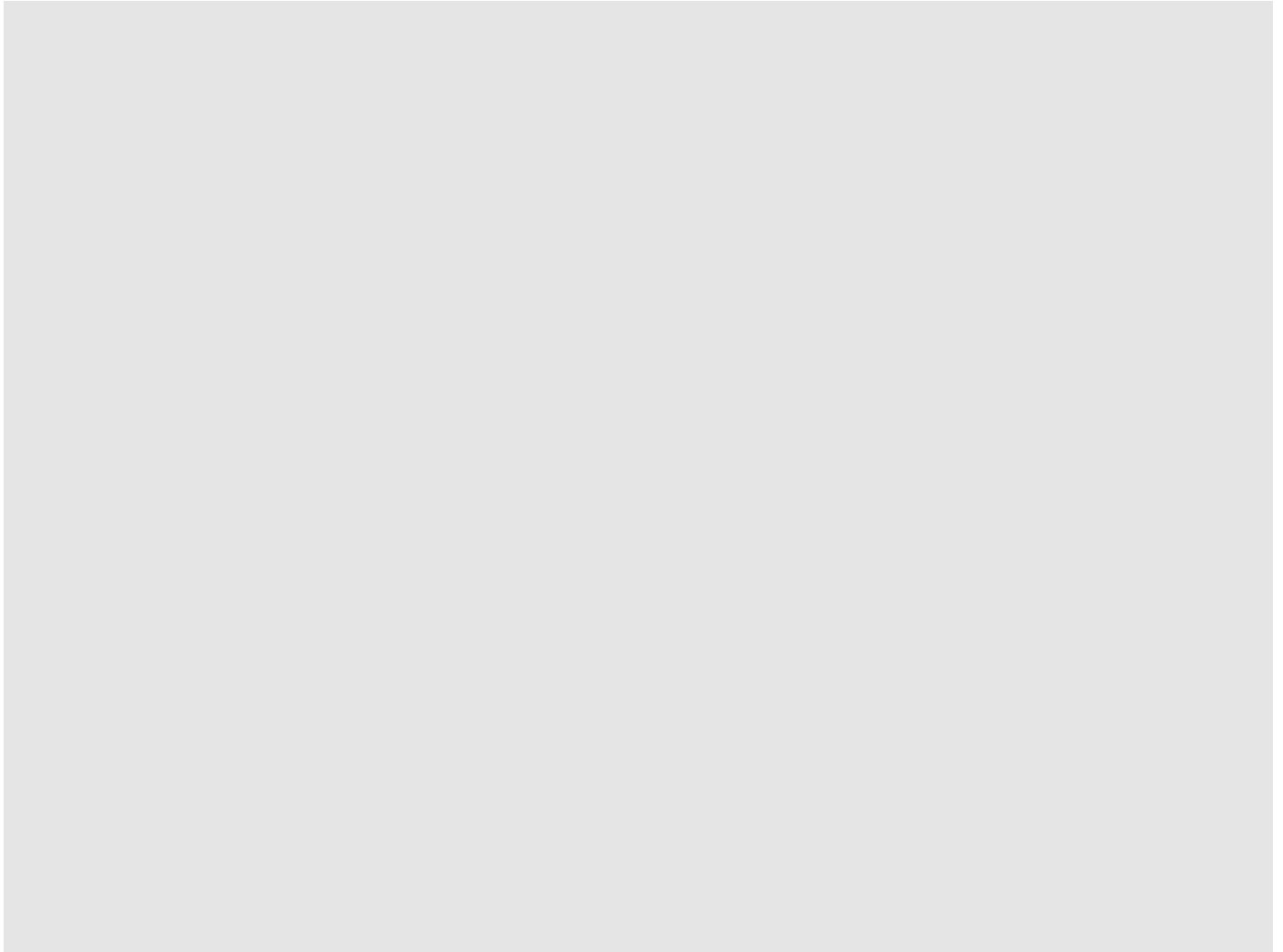
Brunelle



William Monroe basketball star Samantha Brunelle (center) smiles after signing her National Letter of Intent to play at Notre Dame on Wednesday in Stanardsville.

John Harvey/The Daily Progress

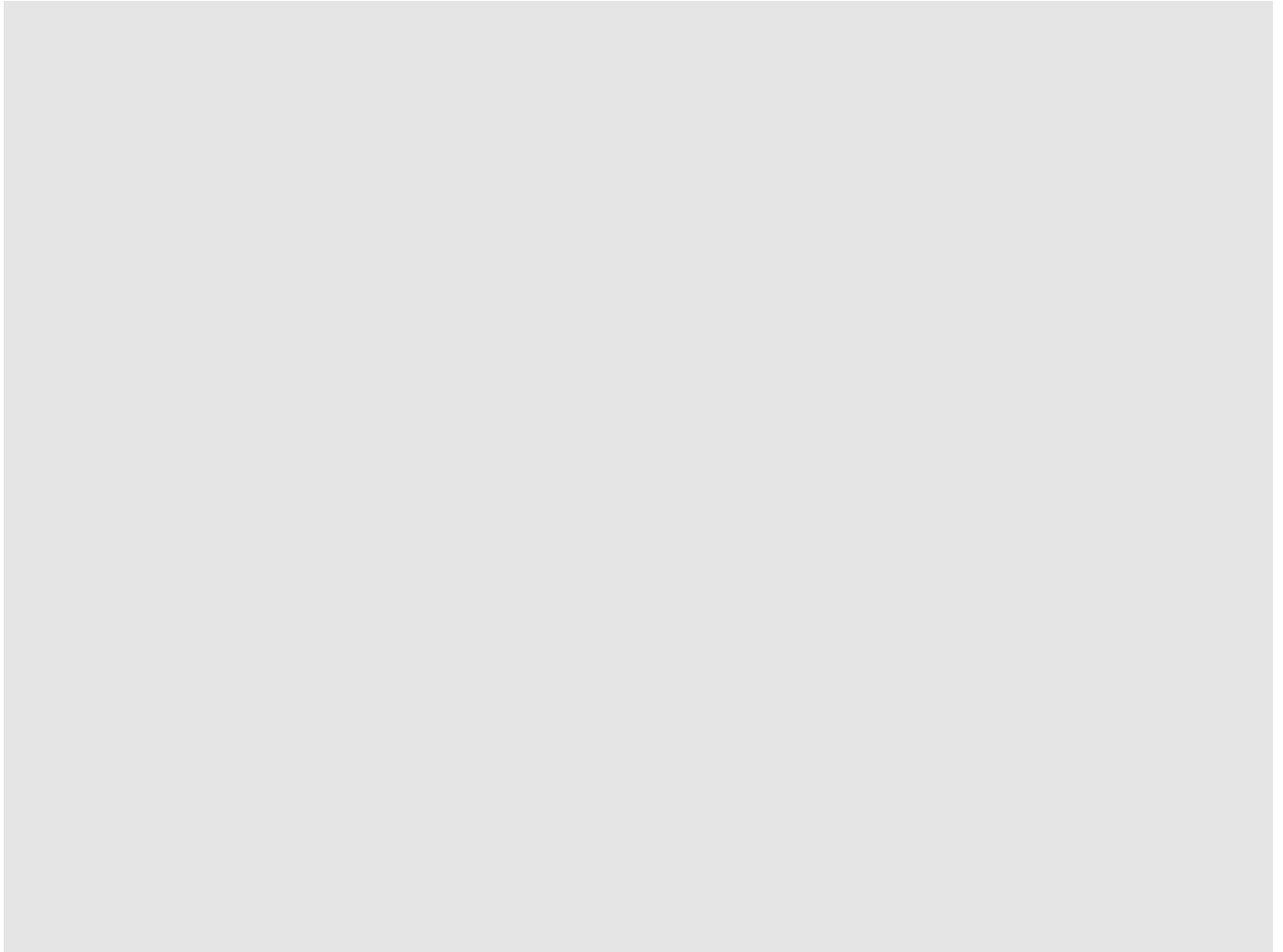
Play for Premies



Western Albemarle senior Elisabeth Coffman, the 2018 Class 3 Jefferson District Player of the Year, and William Monroe senior Samantha Brunelle, the 2018 Northwestern District and Gatorade Virginia State Player of the Year, present a donation to the University of Virginia Children's Hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) from funds raised through a high school girls' basketball event earlier this year. Both players and their teams will play again this season in the Third Annual Play For Premies Showcase on Jan. 5, 2019 at Western Albemarle High School.

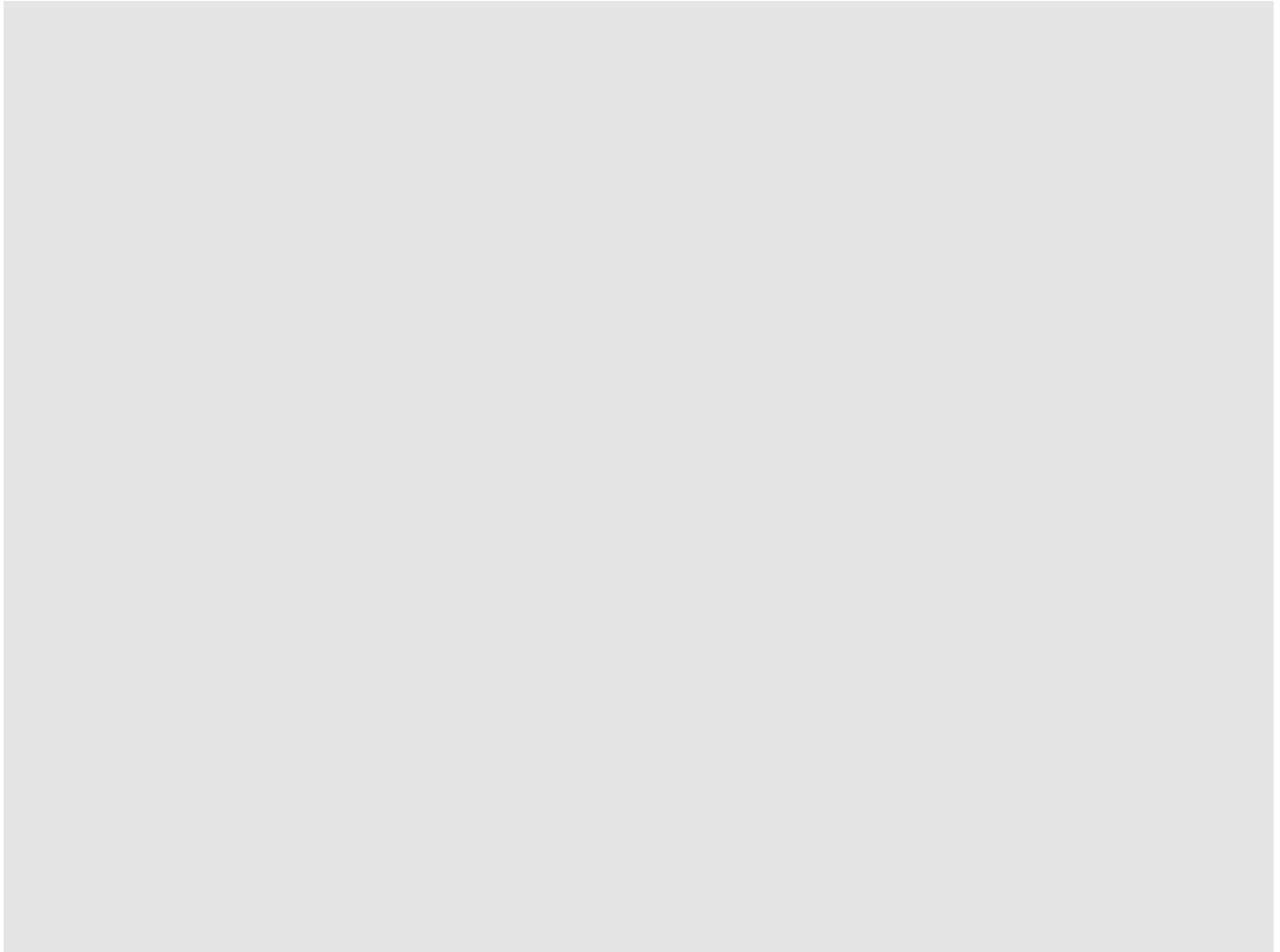
Contributed photo

CDP 1128 Girls hoops 417.JPG



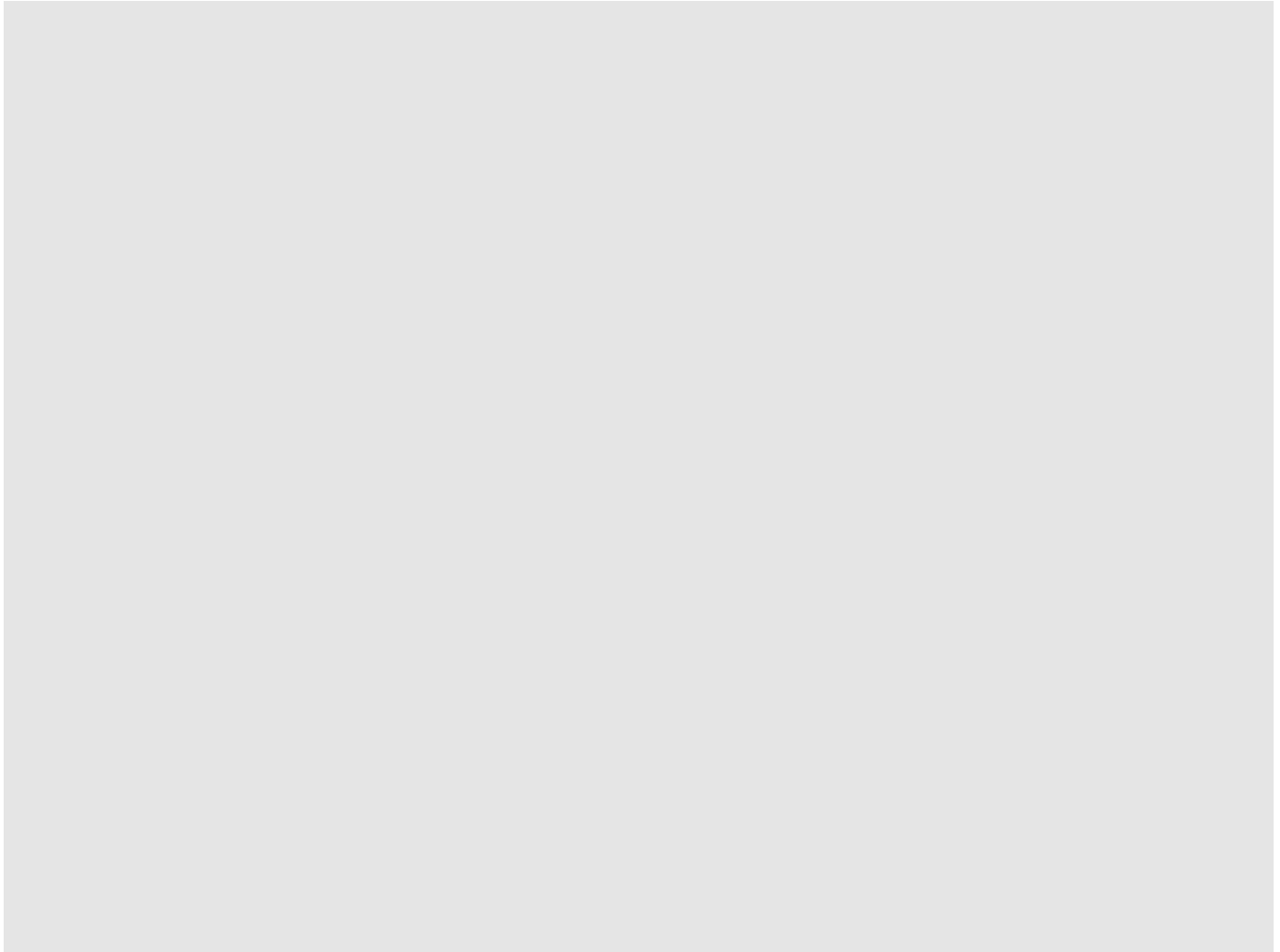
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) shields the ball from three Orange defenders in the first half at William Monroe High School on Tuesday. William Monroe ran up a double digit lead against Orange.

CDP 1128 Girls hoops 414.JPG



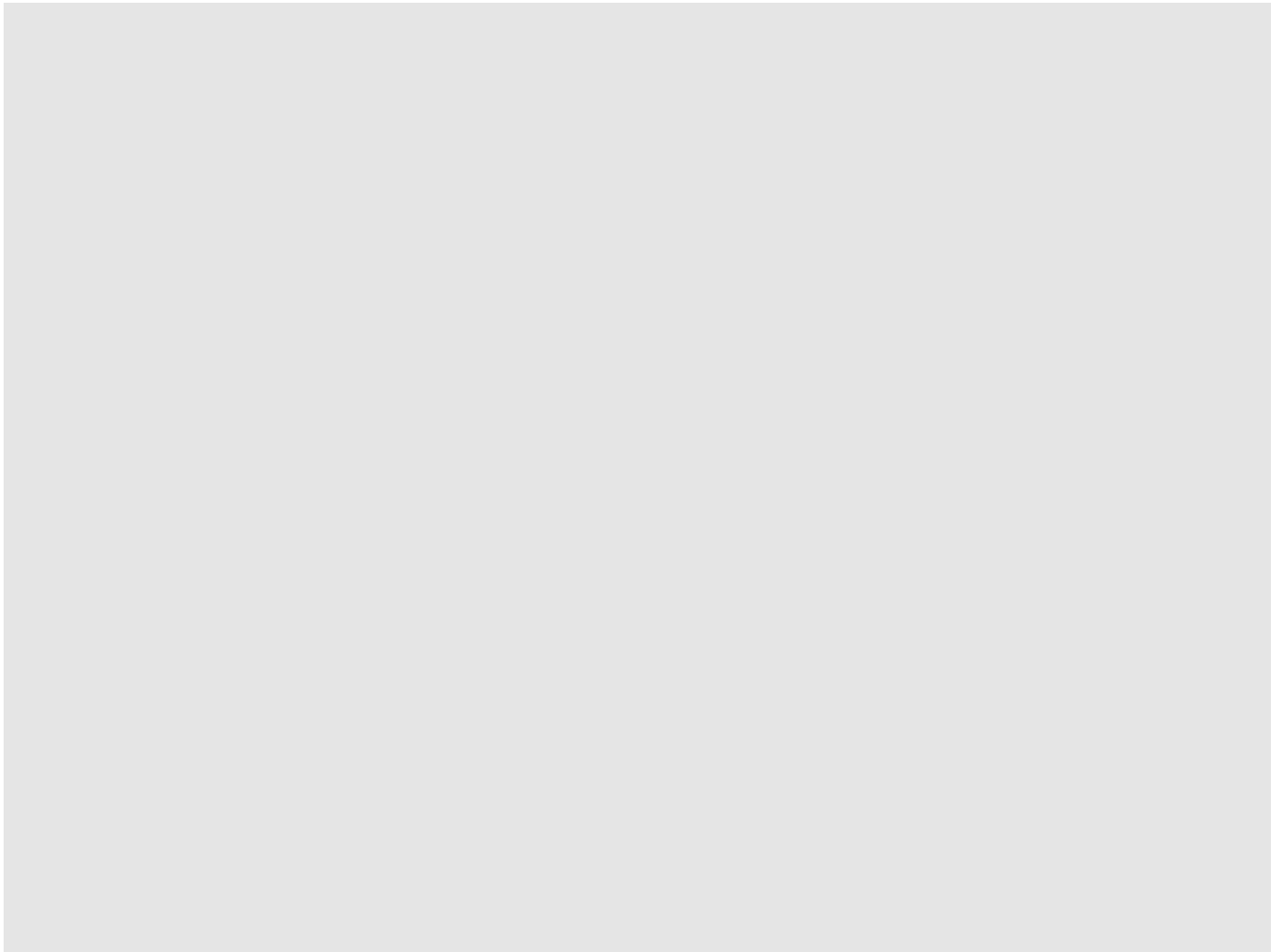
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) lofts a shot over two Orange defenders in the first half at William Monroe High School on Tuesday. William Monroe ran up a double digit lead against Orange.

CDP 1128 Girls hoops 411.JPG



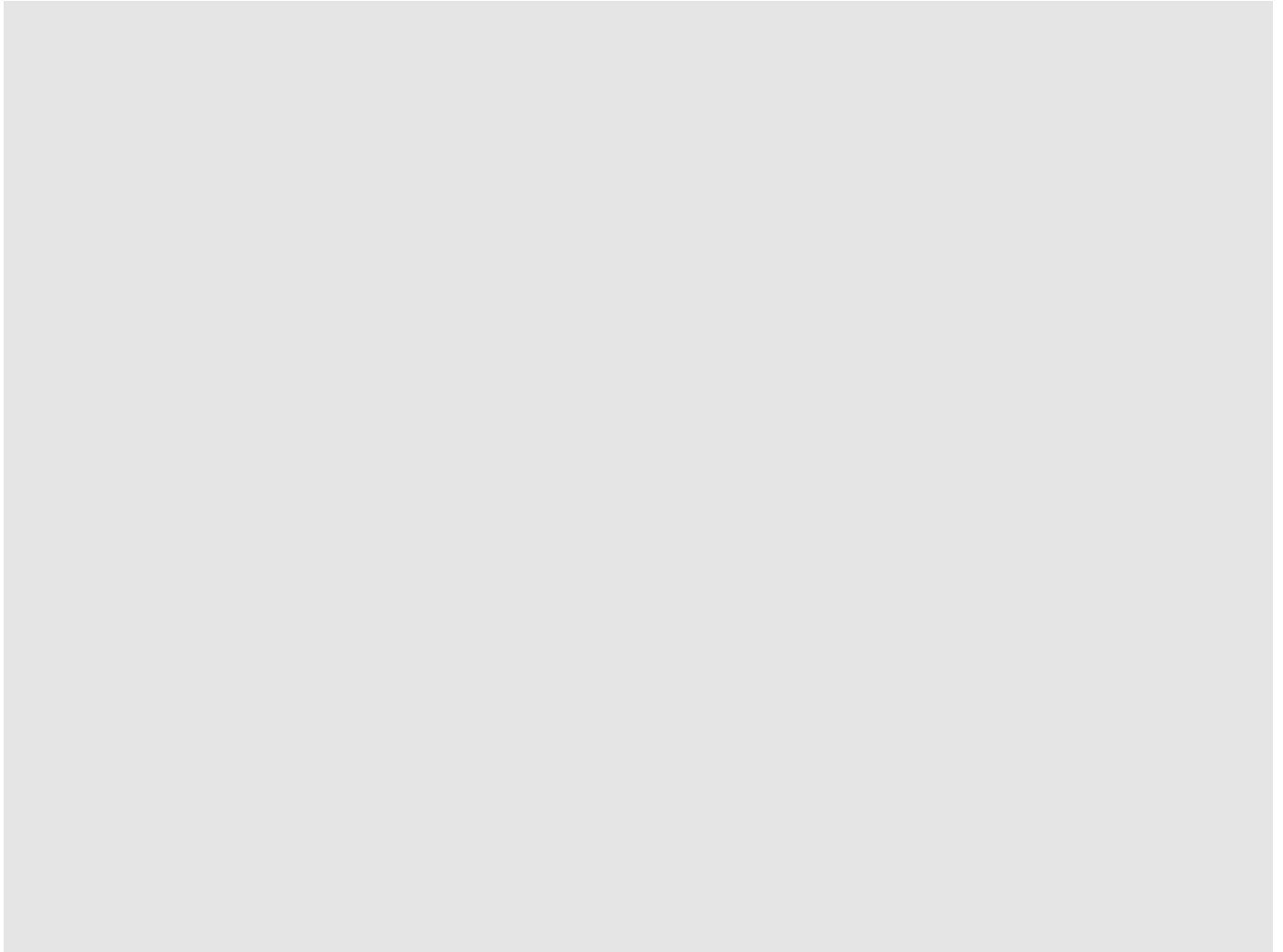
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) pushes the ball up court in the first half at William Monroe High School on Tuesday. William Monroe ran up a double digit lead against Orange.

CDP 1207 William Monroe205.JPG



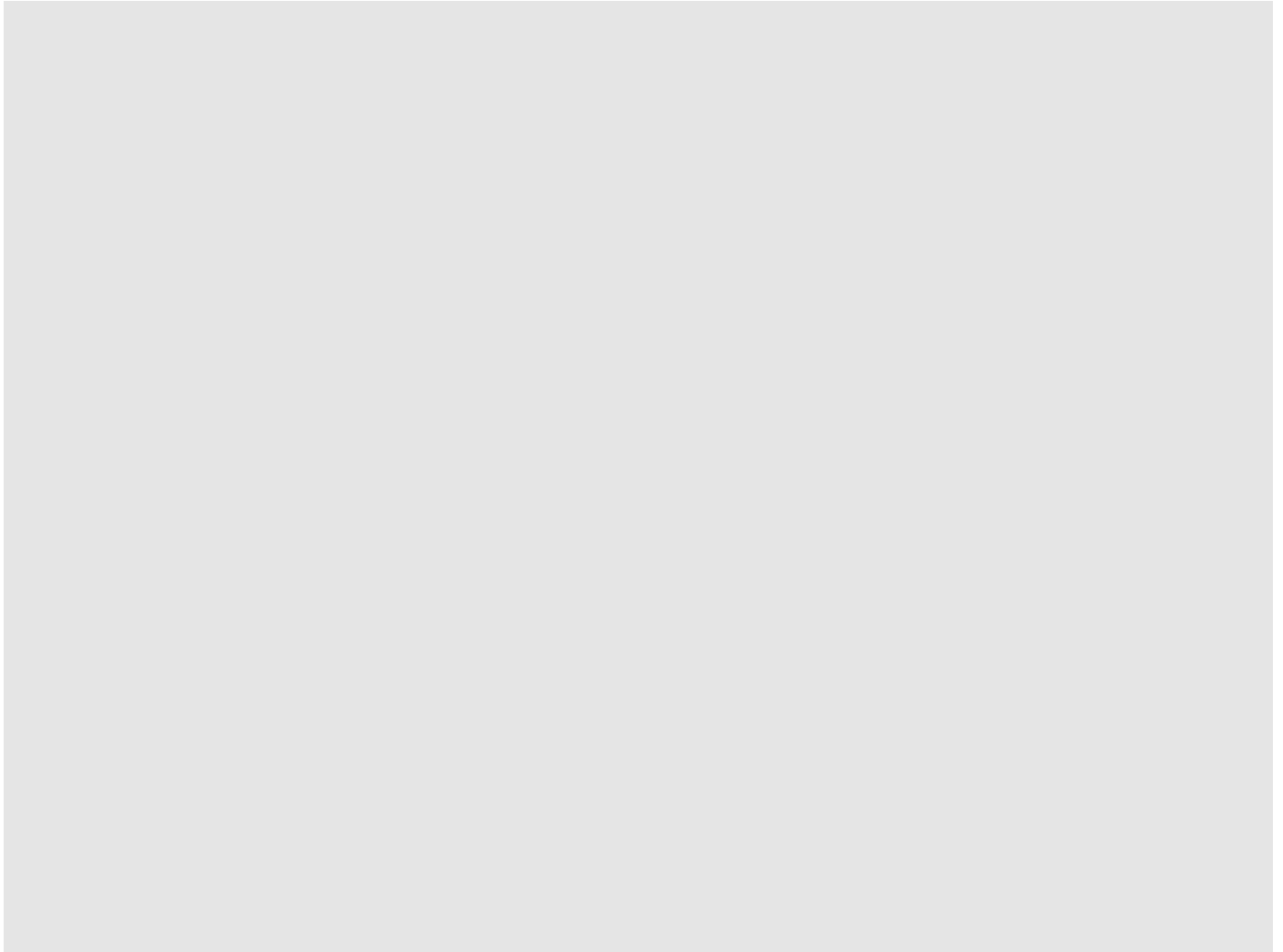
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) reacts to a call next to Madison's Morgan Clark (10) during the game Thursday in Greene County.

CDP 1207 William Monroe202.JPG



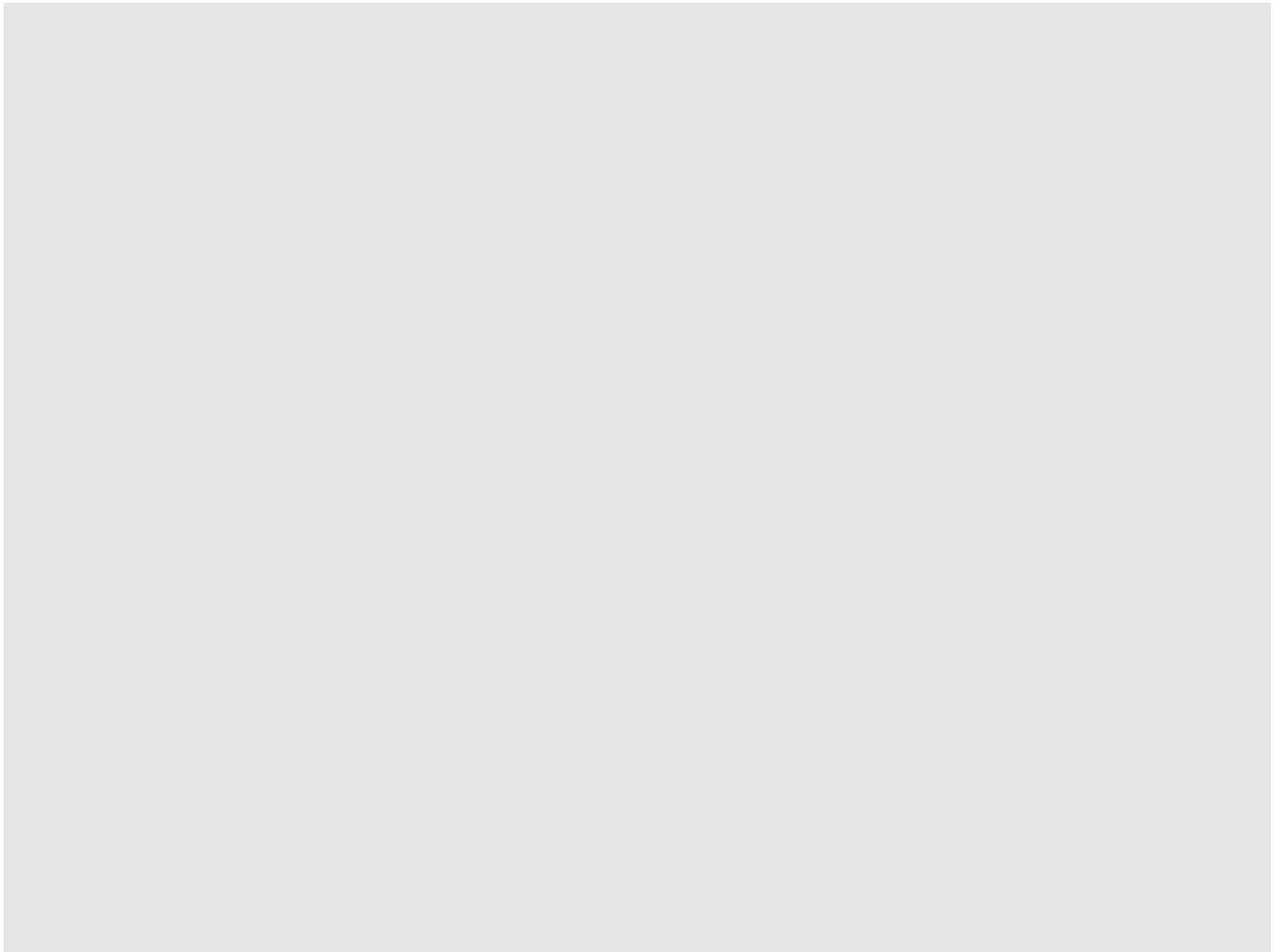
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) goes after a loose ball with Madison's Sterling Woodward (11) during the game Thursday in Greene County.

CDP 1207 William Monroe214.JPG



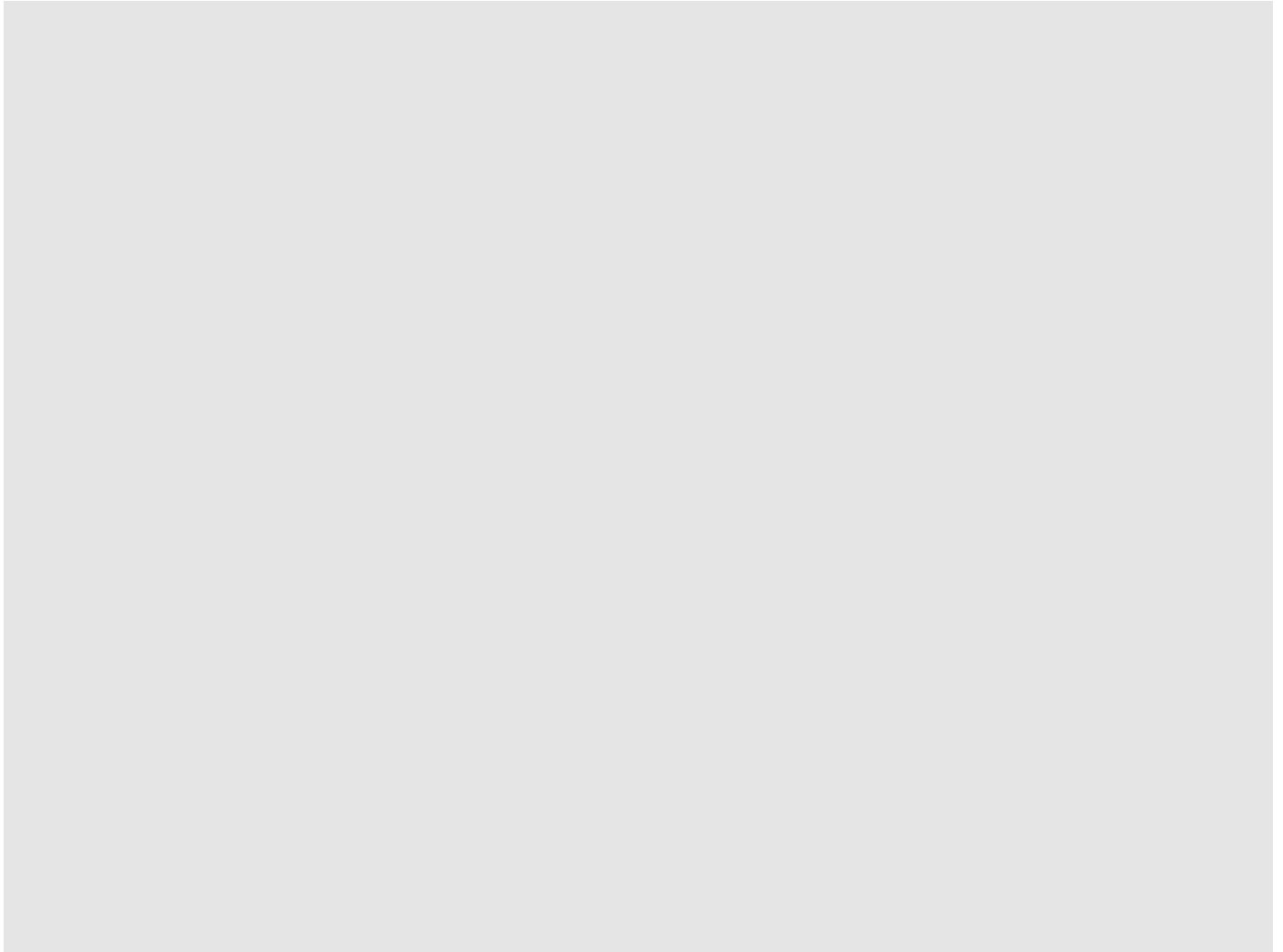
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots over Madison defenders during the game Thursday in Greene County.

CDP 1207 William Monroe212.JPG



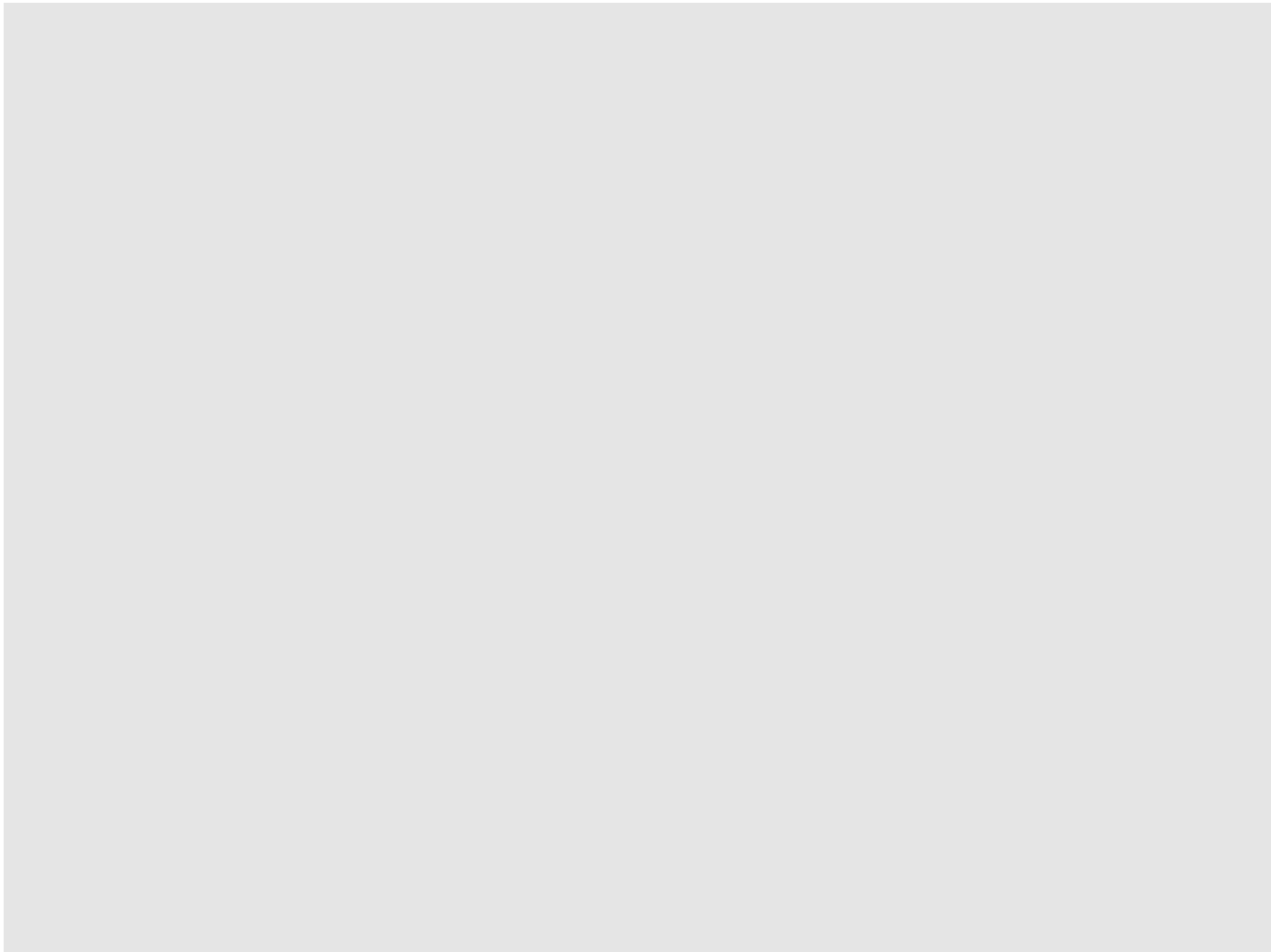
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) defends Madison's Makenna Santinga (15) during the game Thursday in Greene County.

CDP 1229 Holiday Hoops William Monroe 245.JPG



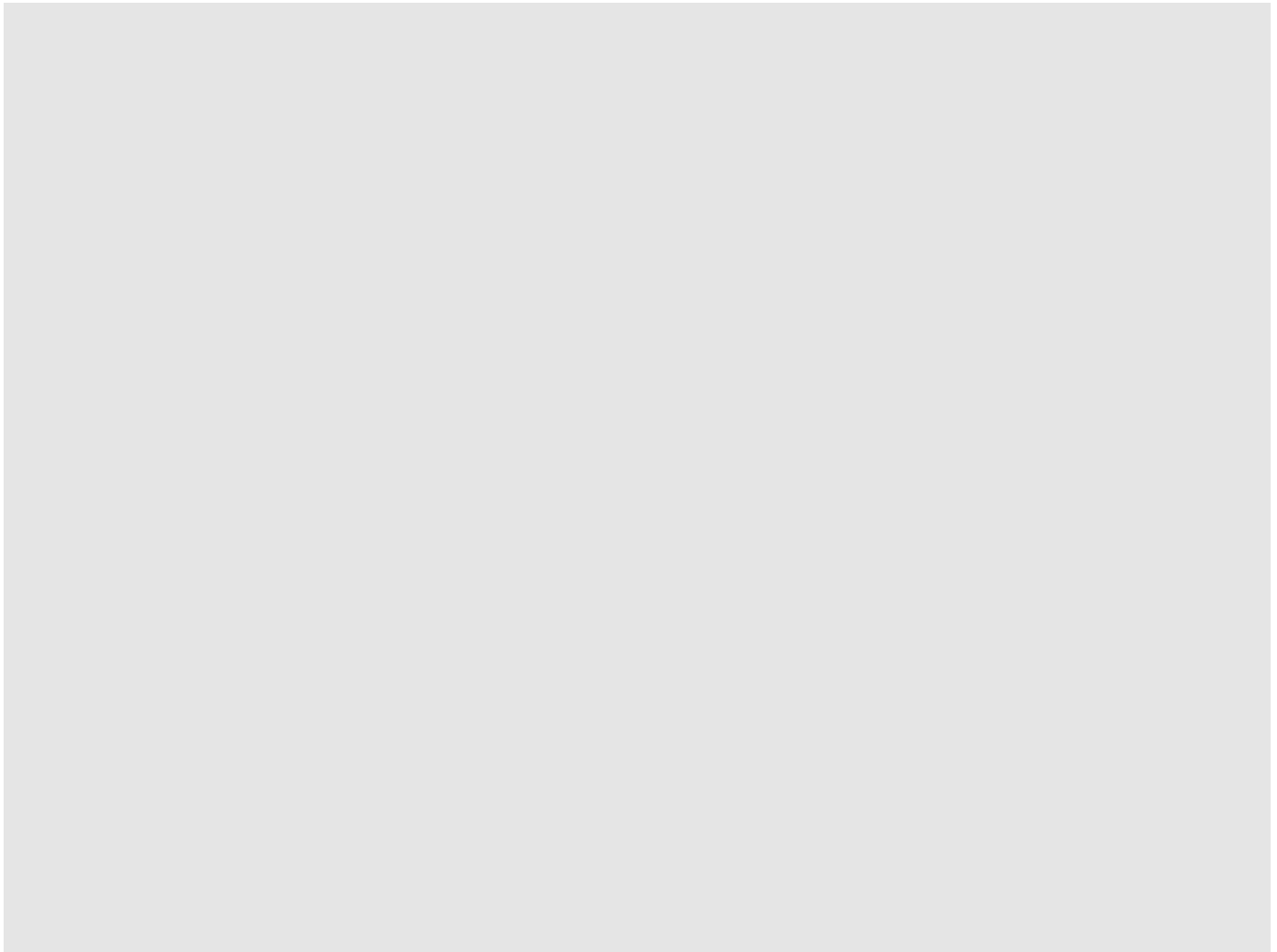
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) gets her ankle wrapped after a mild injury earlier in the game during the second round of the 2018 Daily Progress Holiday Hoops Classic at Monticello High School on Friday. With a tight score in the first half, William Monroe pulled away for a double digit win over Brooke Point.

CDP 1228 Girls Hoops Monroe 212.JPG



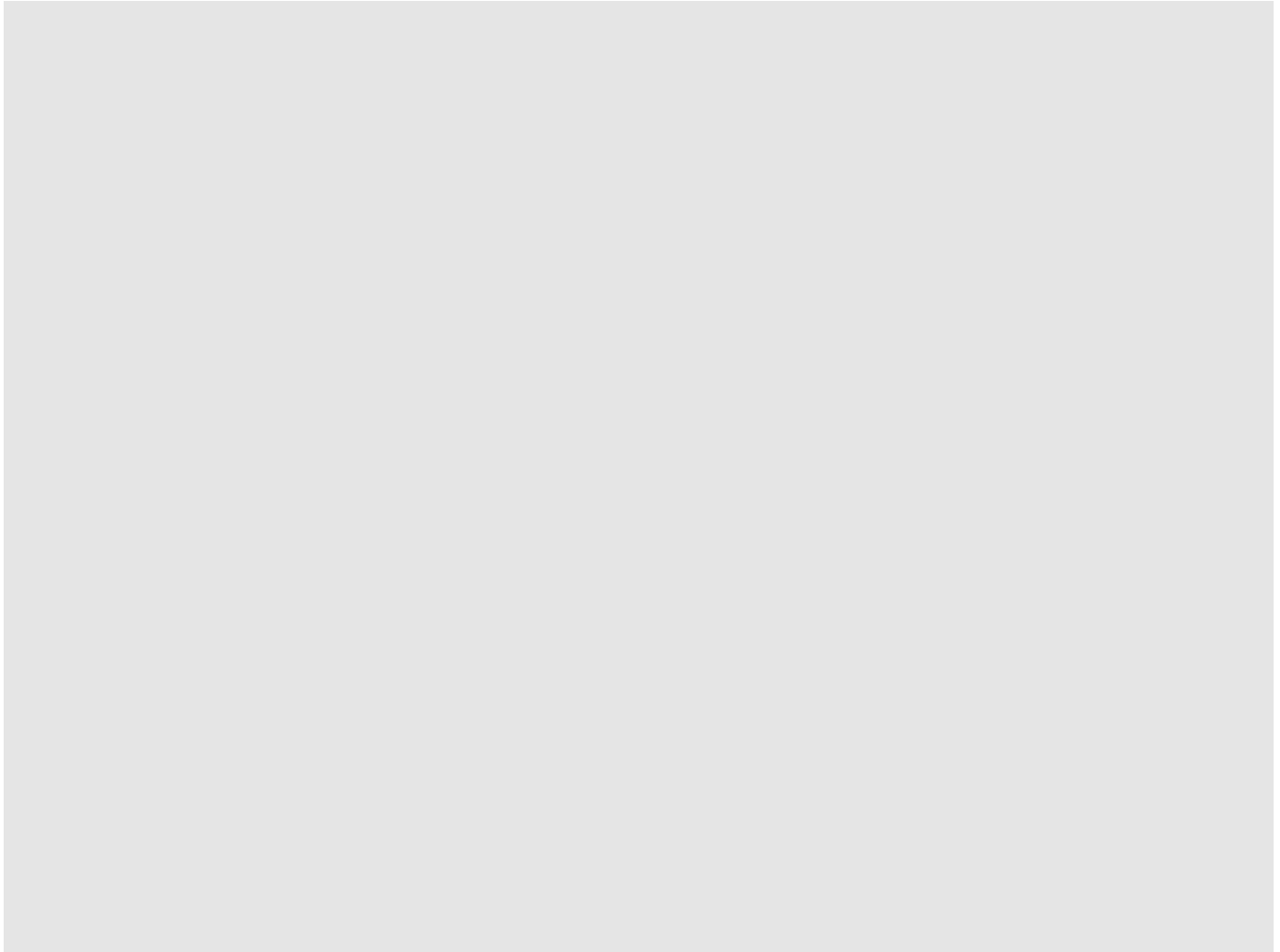
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) steals the ball from Monticello's forward Zhynia Johnson (22) at Charlottesville High School in the first round of the 2018 Daily Progress Holiday Hoops Classic on Thursday. William Monroe held a double digit lead over Monticello for the entirety of the second half.

CDP 1228 Girls Hoops Monroe 209.JPG



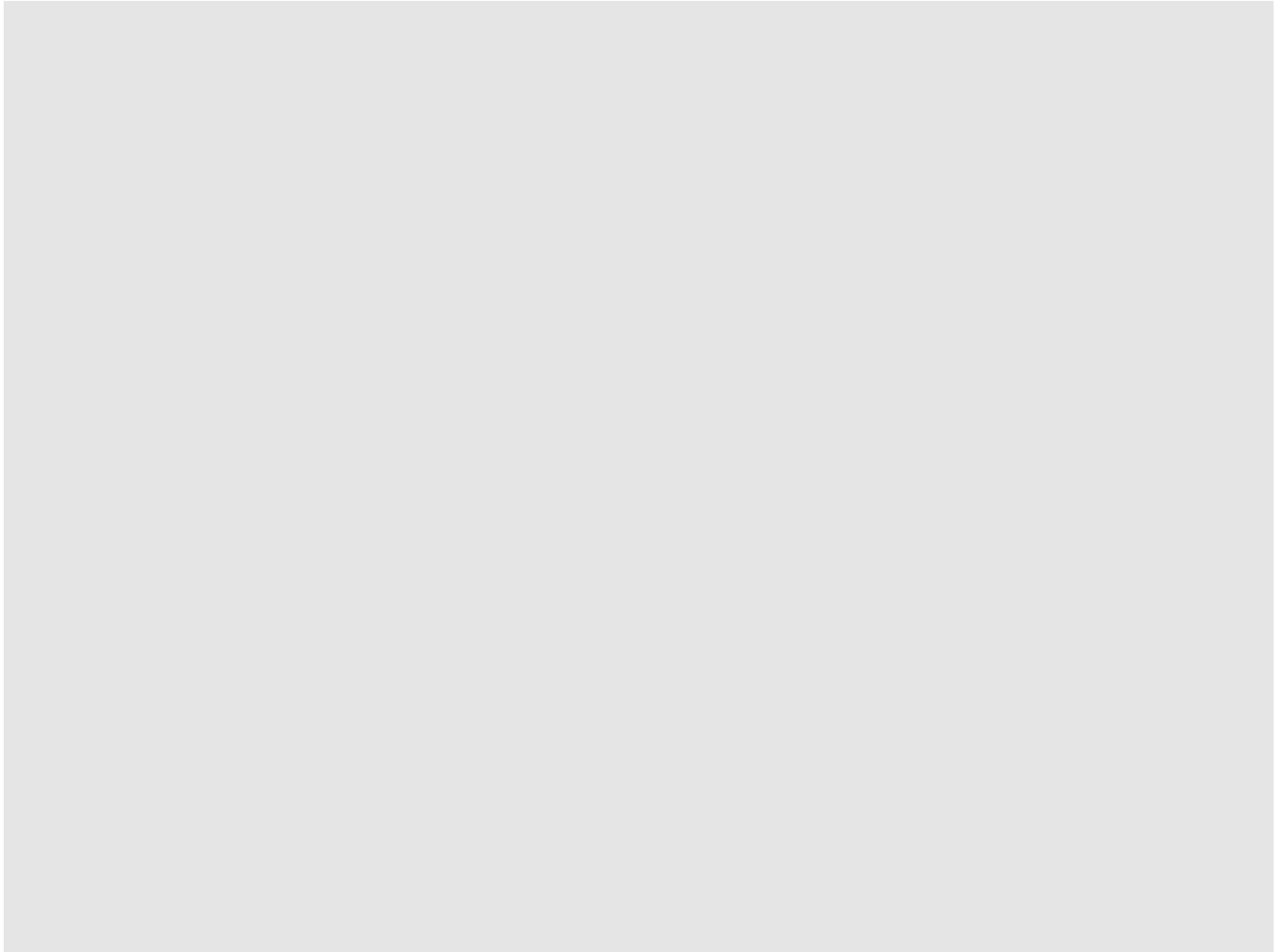
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) takes the court before a match up against Monticello at Charlottesville High School in the first round of the 2018 Daily Progress Holiday Hoops Classic on Thursday. William Monroe held a double digit lead over Monticello for the entirety of the second half.

CDP 1229 Holiday Hoops William Monroe 244.JPG



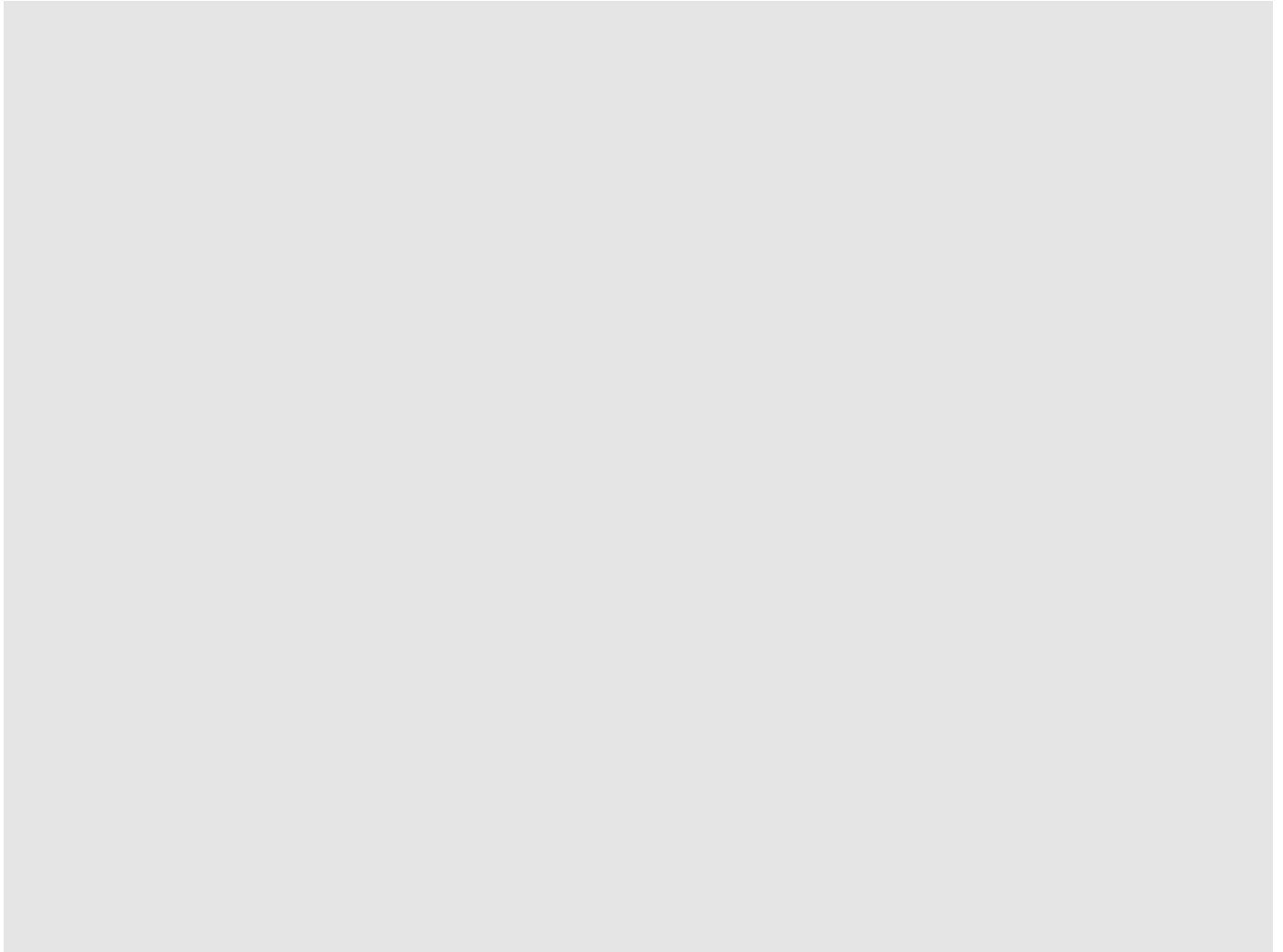
ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots unguarded during the second round of the 2018 Daily Progress Holiday Hoops Classic at Monticello High School on Friday. With a tight score in the first half, William Monroe pulled away for a double digit win over Brooke Point.

CDP 0302 william Monroe447.JPG



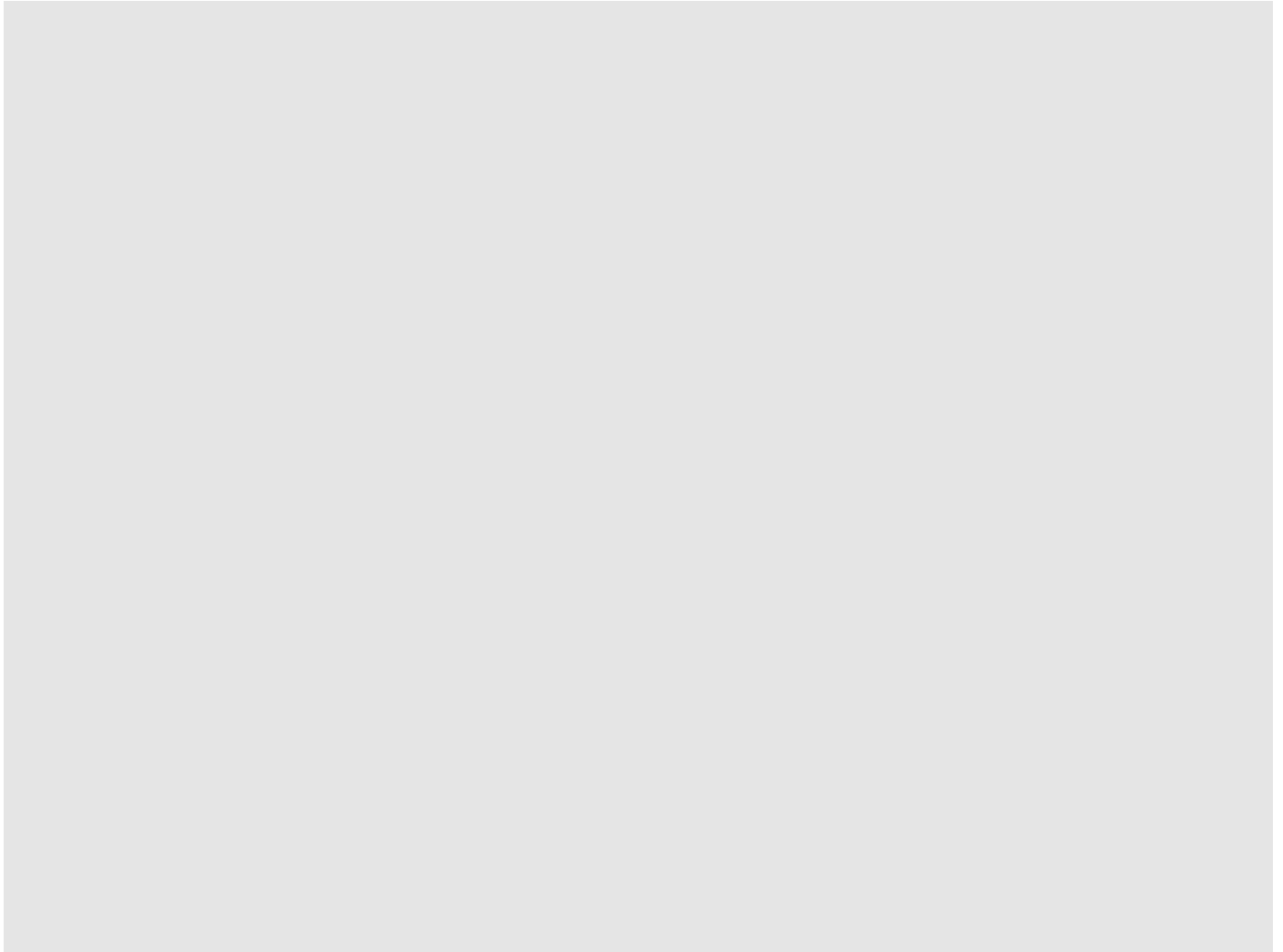
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) moves past Park View's Azaria Williams (22) during the VHSl Class 3 state quarterfinals Friday at Orange County High School. William Monroe defeated Park View to advance to the semi-finals.

CDP 0302 william Monroe449.JPG



ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) pass the ball surrounded by Park View defenders during the VHSI Class 3 state quarterfinals Friday at Orange County High School. William Monroe defeated Park View to advance to the semi-finals.

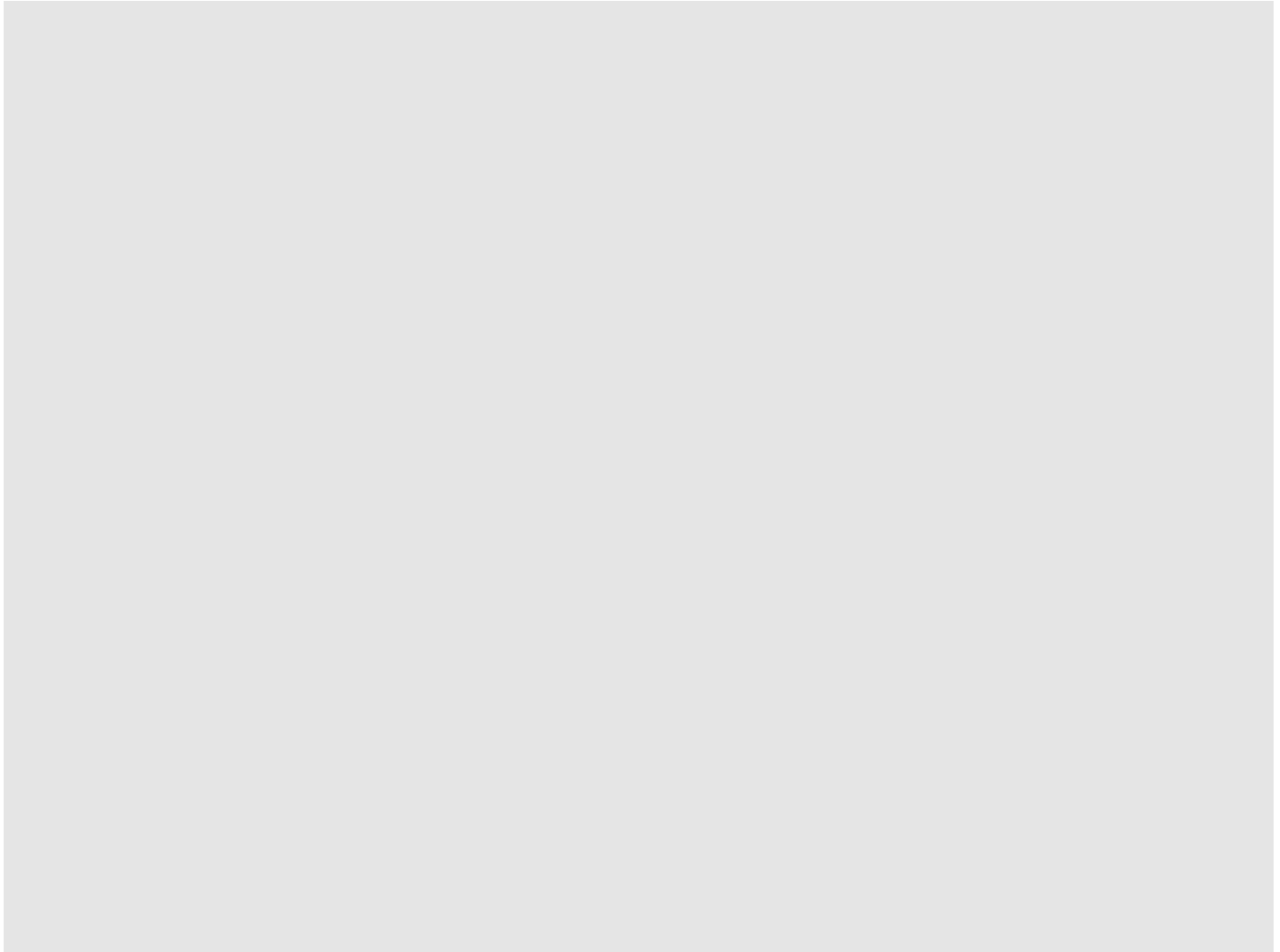
CDP 0302 william Monroe450.JPG



William Monroe forward Samantha Brunelle shoots a 3-point basket during the VHSI Class 3 state quarterfinals on March 1, 2019 at Orange County High School.

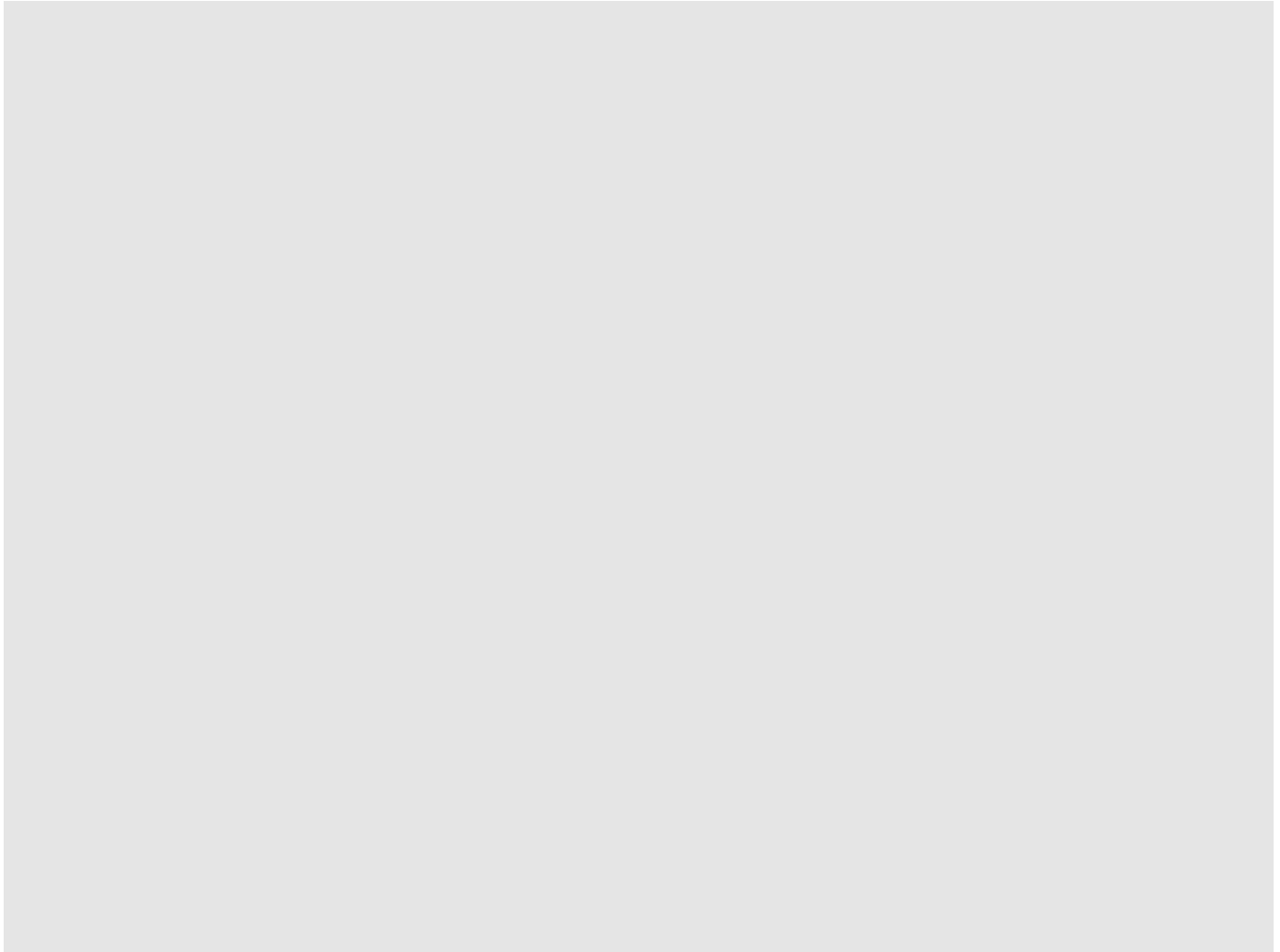
ANDREW SHURTLEFF, THE DAILY PROGRESS

CDP 0302 william Monroe453.JPG



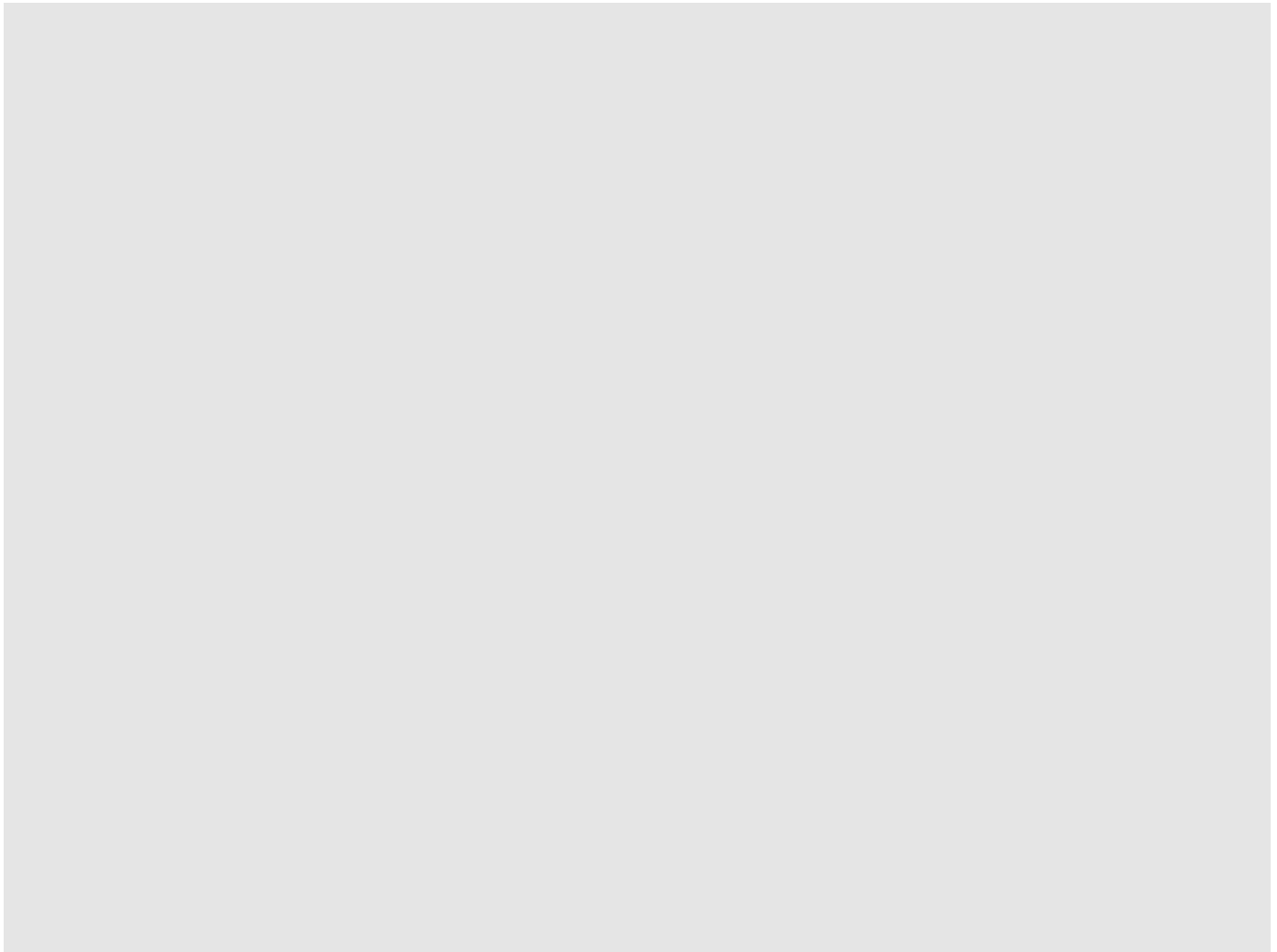
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) shoots a 3-point basket during the VHSI Class 3 state quarterfinals Friday at Orange County High School. William Monroe defeated Park View to advance to the semi-finals.

CDP 0302 william Monroe454.JPG



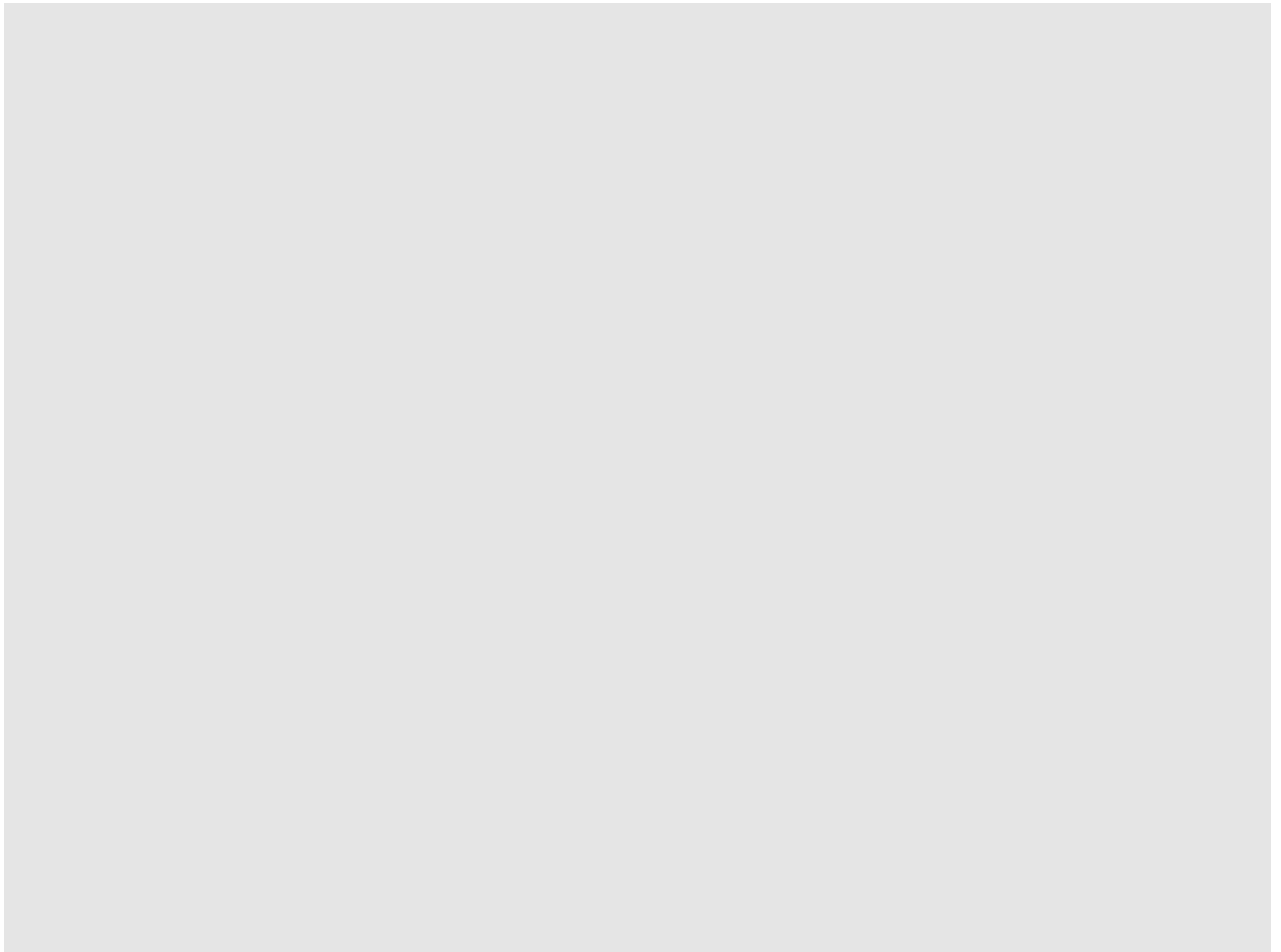
ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) moves to the basket past Park View's Azaria Williams (22) during the VHSI Class 3 state quarterfinals Friday at Orange County High School. William Monroe defeated Park View to advance to the semi-finals.

CDP 0302 william Monroe457.JPG



ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS William Monroe's forward Samantha Brunelle (33) moves down court during the VHSI Class 3 state quarterfinals Friday at Orange County High School. William Monroe defeated Park View to advance to the semi-finals.

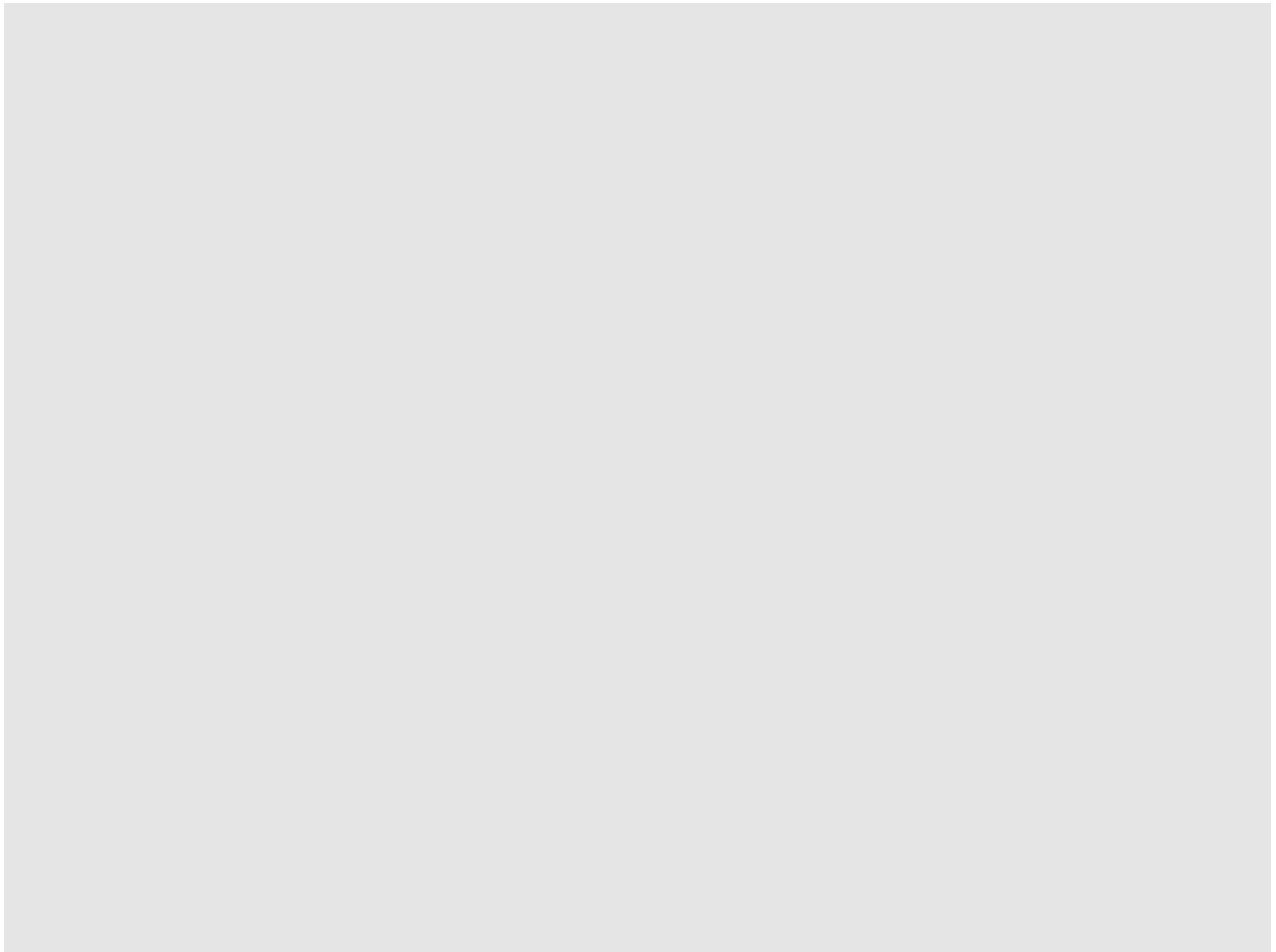
Samantha Brunelle



Samantha Brunelle hugs coach Jess Stafford before her last regular season game on Feb. 5.

photo by Brian Mellott/for the Greene County Record

Brunelle



The Schewel's Athlete of the Week is William Monroe's Samantha Brunelle.

ZACK WAJSGRAS/THE DAILY PROGRESS

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With emerging sport status from the VHSL, high school girls wrestling in Virginia takes 'a great first step'

Louisa County's Taylor Waddy started wrestling at a young age, squaring off against mostly boys.

Waddy and other female wrestlers in Virginia will have more opportunities to compete against each other in the near future.

The Virginia High School League is on the verge of adding girls wrestling as a sanctioned sport in the Commonwealth. In September, the VHSL Executive Committee voted to designate girls wrestling as an "emerging sport" starting with the 2022-23 season. The sport now has three years to meet the 50% + 1 member schools that currently have wrestling for the sport to be sanctioned by the VHSL.

According to VHSL numbers submitted to the National Federation of High Schools, approximately 271 schools in Virginia fielded a boys wrestling team during the 2021-22 season, with 131 of those schools having at least one female on the team.

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Under the proposal, a girls team is considered if there is at least one female who makes it through the hydration testing and makes it onto the school's master eligibility list. There would have to be at least 136 schools with females on their rosters for the VHSL to move forward with the sanctioning of girls wrestling. If those requirements are not met, the three-year process would have to start over.

VHSL executive director Billy Haun said the move to designate girls wrestling as an emerging sport has been a long time coming.

"We've had wrestling folks talking about girls wrestling for four or five years," Haun said. "We talked about making this an emerging sport a few years ago and some of the wrestling folks wanted to wait another year and then we got hit with COVID and that put it on hold."

The push for girls wrestling was spearheaded by several schools, including Culpeper County, Meridian and Brentsville District, who have a long-standing tradition for having female wrestlers in their programs.

Culpeper County wrestling coach Alex Csontos and Virginia Women's Wrestling started the push back in 2016. Csontos worked with former Spotsylvania athletic director and Virginia Wrestling Association state chairman Bill Swink, along with Virginia Women's Wrestling director Sara Bahoura, Riverside High School coaches Matt Erice and Aubrey Burkett-Erice, Riverbend High School coach Mark Roberts and athletic directors at a number of schools to bring the plan to fruition.

"We've gotten our first big step done," Csontos said. "Along with hanging an unlimited number of girls events around the state now, this emerging sport proposal also gives the women a VHSL invitational state tournament. This would be the first year that it would be recognized by the VHSL as an official championship, even though it's still an invitational. Previously, we were not allowed to call it a VHSL championship event because it was not a sanctioned sport yet."

In Central Virginia, girls wrestling has been on the rise the past several seasons. Louisa County had several female wrestlers last season and Coach Roger Stewart's program now has approximately 20 girls competing at the junior varsity and varsity levels.

Waddy was a regular for the Lions' co-ed team last season enjoyed a lot of success. In the five competitions against female opponents, she was unbeaten (14-0) and is recognized as one of the top prep female wrestlers in the country.

"The vote of VHSL making women's wrestling an emerging sport is very exciting," Waddy said. "Virginia Women's Wrestling has been working very hard to get women's wrestling sanctioned and this is a big step in the right direction. To me, this ruling means I will have more opportunities to compete and face new opponents. I am also really looking forward to an official state tournament this coming year."

Waddy was one of several wrestlers selected to speak at the "Wrestle Like a Girl" event in Washington D.C. earlier this year.

"I felt that it was an awesome opportunity and I was very glad to get to speak on behalf of the female wrestlers in Virginia," Waddy said. "Based on most of their responses, they appeared to be supportive of the idea."

Waddy has been wrestling against boys since she started in the sixth grade and admits it has been an "okay" experience.

"Once I made it to high school, they became naturally stronger and I can't compete with most of them," Waddy said. "I definitely felt a disadvantage and a high risk of injury wrestling high school boys."

She's excited about the opportunity for more girls competitions and a VHSL sanctioned invitational tournament.

"I feel that most people were okay with them happening and I know all the girls wrestlers were very glad they were available," Waddy said. "The only downside was they sometimes conflicted with the boys' matches and were

pushed to the side by some coaches."

Orange County, Monticello and Fluvanna County also had female wrestlers on their rosters last winter and are part of the growth of the sport.

Orange County wrestling coach Bryan Seal said that he's had at least one female wrestler on his team for the past four years. Following the onset of COVID-19, the participation numbers dipped a bit, but have bounced back this year.

"We have quite a few incoming freshmen that have been involved in our booster program, so we have every reason to believe our numbers are going to grow, especially with our future plans," Seal said. "Our plan is to offer wrestling to girls as a separate practice, but still as a part of our co-ed wrestling team. As we're in the infancy stages of this development, we hope to meet with Orange County administrative team to receive their blessing on a partial girls wrestling schedules, as part of our team."

During the first year of the three-year emerging sport window, the VHSL will hold a girls invitational state championship Feb. 24-25, 2023. The tournament will offer 11 weight classes and girls can participate in a total of 12 co-ed or female only events during the season.

During the 2023-24 season, the VHSL girls championship will expand to the NFHS 12-weight-class model. In year three, the goal is move to a tournament that matches the boys regional and state championship dates, using regional qualifiers for advancement and host it at the same venue of the team's respective classification.

"Virginia and other states have a lot of girls wrestling and the numbers seem to be growing," Haun said. "We have a few teams that could field a separate girls and boys team right now. It is growing quickly in high schools across the

country. Girls wrestling at the college level is growing as well. I think it was important for our girl wrestlers. If there are enough girls wrestling, we should recognize this as a VHSL sanctioned sport."

For Csontos, he believes this is an important decision

"Personally, I feel this is a great first step for Virginia," he said. "We've gotten to know where we can start building women's teams, not just a few girls, here and there at a handful of schools. We can show women in high school now that they have a chance to win a state title in wrestling without having to compete against men, which was a big deterrent for the girls that I've talked to over the years."

Csontos remembers watching some of the best girls in the nation compete in his program, including the likes of Jesse Kirby, Lei Nails, Bri Csontos and Trinity Berry, who achieved All-American or international success on the mat. He said that despite their success, their accomplishments weren't fully appreciated.

"They were looked down upon by guys who said that they weren't good because they couldn't make the guys state tournament," Csontos said. "No matter how good these women were, they were always held up to a measuring stick that didn't exist for any other VHSL female sport."

The Culpeper County coach also believes the decision could spark much-needed growth in the sport.

"I think it will save the sport," Csontos said. "It's no secret that wrestling, in general, has been losing athletes for years, so along with trying to recruit more guys, women's wrestling has opened up so many people's eyes to show what a great sport this is. I think it will greatly increase our visual exposure to parents as their kids are growing up and offer a place where

their kids, boys and girls, can both go to a practice and not have to think about if wrestling is a boys only sport."

"I have a really good feeling this sport is going to take off and participation numbers are going to go through the roof," she said. "All of the other female wrestlers I've talked to love that they will not have to wrestle guys as much or feel like they are not truly a part of the team."

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