

Led by Pinkston, New Heights climbs iS8 mountain

By ZACH BRAZILLER

Last Updated: 7:15 AM, November 2, 2009

Posted: 2:06 AM, November 2, 2009

New Heights has created a name for itself the last several years by producing Division I athletes and winning several prestigious tournaments.

Even so, Sunday's thrilling 87-83 victory over the Panthers in the finals of the iS8/Nike Fall Tip-Off Classic in Jamaica was the most important moment for the emerging AAU program.

"This is the biggest, because it's the culmination of everything we've been talking about – sticking together, plaything through adversity, just being prepared and understanding it's a long game and you're gonna have some peaks and valleys," New Heights coach and athletic director Kimani Young said. "Today, not only did we win the game, we played it the right way, playing tough and playing together."

"As (tournament director) Pete Edwards said, 'they climbed the mountain today.' It's big for them as kids, to get momentum going into the high school season, and it's big for us as a program."

New Heights trailed the Panthers by 16 points in each half, but prevailed, in large part, because of the effort of standout Jayvaughn Pinkston. The Bishop Loughlin star, the top unsigned senior in the city, had 29 points, scoring inside and out. St. Anthony's (N.J.) senior Devon Collier added 17 points and 11 rebounds, Thomas Jefferson's Dave Coley followed with 15 and Pinkston's Loughlin teammate, Branden Frazier, added 11.

"Jay was big, he put us on his back," Young said. "He wouldn't let us lose today."

The victory was especially encouraging considering New Heights had reached the iS8 final for the last few years, only to lose to the Panthers, Juice All-Stars and Playaz Club Seniors. They were the last team standing in the 68-team tournament consisting of AAU and high-school teams from Connecticut, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania.

They beat St. Benedict's (N.J.), a perennial nationally ranked program, in the semifinals and knocked off a Panthers team that included former Archbishop Molloy guard Russ Smith and South Kent (Conn.) swingman JJ Moore (team-high 22 points). Now, they would like to repeat as champions.

"We're gonna try to get better, add a piece or two and win it again next spring and send these guys off to college," Young said.

Moore was the iS8 Player of the Year while Pinkston was the playoff MVP. He was on the first team, joined by Derrick Williams of St. Anthony's, Smith, Aaron Brown of St. Benedict's and Fuquan Edwin of Paterson Catholic (N.J.) Collier made the second team, as did Leroy Isler of Boys & Girls, Jeff Short of John F. Kennedy, Sterling Gibbs from Seton Hall Prep (N.J.) and Myck Kabongo of St. Benedict's.

zbraziller@nypost.com