



## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Ava Raymond's Full Court Finish

### ***Ava Raymond Delivers Game-Winning Shot to Lead Zachary to Back-to-Back State Championships***

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**Hammond, LA** — After six days and 29 straight basketball games at the 2026 LHSAA Girls' Marsh Madness Tournament at the University Center in Hammond, I started to get a little nervous.

Championship week is full of unforgettable moments, the kind that stay with you long after the trophies are handed out. But as the final game of the week approached, I found myself still

*Images taken by Russell Palmer & Michael Odendahl*



wondering what the best thing I had seen at state would be. There had been great performances, incredible effort, and more than a few close finishes, but nothing had quite separated itself from the rest.

Then the final game tipped off.

Within minutes, it was clear this one felt different. From the opening possessions, the Division I Non-Select championship between Zachary and Slidell carried a level of intensity that filled the University Center with anticipation. Every possession felt important. Every defensive stop was met with a roar from one side of the arena or the other. Both teams played with the kind of passion that reminds you these games mean something far beyond a final score.

You could feel that something special was building.

For most of the night, though, it didn't look like the ending Zachary had hoped for. The Broncos struggled to find rhythm offensively, turning the ball over 24 times and shooting just 39 percent from the floor while missing 11 free throws. Slidell capitalized on the mistakes and controlled the tempo for much of the game, building a double-digit lead in the second quarter and forcing Zachary to spend nearly the entire night chasing.

In fact, the Broncos led for just four minutes and sixteen seconds all evening.

But championship games have a way of reminding everyone that the only seconds that truly matter are the final ones.

With just over a minute left in the game, Slidell had the ball with a three-point lead and looked to cross midcourt before being met by a Bronco double team that led to an Ava Raymond steal and one-hand finish at the basket to make it a one-point game.

With under 30 seconds to play, Zachary freshman Marcia Robinson went to the line to shoot two. The Broncos struggled from the free-throw line all night, and these were the two that mattered most. The young guard went 1-for-2 from the charity stripe and knotted things up at 51. Johnson's made free throw put Zachary's total to 9-of-20 on the night.

The clock stopped at 16.5 seconds when Slidell's Cianni Williams was fouled. She was sent to the line for the first time of the night. Williams was coming off an incredible performance in the semifinals, where she scored 23 points to lead her squad to a win over Prairieville. After scoring 19 points through three quarters on Thursday night, the junior went 1-for-1 from the line to make it 52-51, Slidell.

With those 16.5 seconds remaining, Zachary trailed Slidell by one point and was set to inbound the ball. Head coach Tami McClure called a timeout and gathered her team for one final play. When the huddle broke, everyone in the arena knew who was getting the ball.

Ava Raymond.



“This woman was the only one who was going to get that ball at the end,” McClure said. “I told her, ‘Go get it.’”

Raymond did exactly that.



The senior forward took the inbound and pushed the ball up the floor, attacking quickly before Slidell’s defense could fully settle. She beat her defender at the left side of the perimeter, drove into the lane, stepped right into the paint, and shot a floater over her defender.

For a brief moment, the entire University Center held its breath.

Then the ball dropped through the net. Just like that, Zachary had the lead.

Eight seconds later, the Broncos had something even bigger: another state championship.

Raymond finished her senior night with a performance worthy of the moment, scoring 27 points on 13-of-22 shooting while adding nine rebounds and five steals to lead Zachary

to a dramatic 53–52 victory. The McNeese basketball commit was later named the game’s Most Outstanding Player for the second consecutive year, a fitting recognition for a player who delivered when her team needed her most.

“It’s my senior year, so of course I’m going to go out with a bang,” Raymond said afterward. “I just had confidence.”

That confidence defined the entire night for Zachary.



Despite the early mistakes and turnovers, the Broncos never panicked. McClure made a key adjustment in the third quarter, switching to a half-court trapping defense that began to swing the momentum. Zachary's athleticism started to show as the pressure forced turnovers and created transition opportunities, and Raymond took control offensively during the stretch, scoring 10 points in the third quarter alone to pull the Broncos back into the game.

Still, Slidell refused to go away. Every time Zachary made a push, the Tigers answered. With two minutes remaining, the Broncos were still chasing the lead before a series of plays suddenly changed everything. Kennedy Whitfield banked in a putback layup to cut the deficit. Raymond followed with a steal and a layup in transition. Moments later, Ava Bell stepped to the free-throw line and converted one of two attempts to tie the game.

A season that had stretched across months had suddenly come down to a matter of seconds, a matter of seconds where Ava Raymond was the last one with the ball in her hands.

For most of the night, the Broncos had struggled. The statistics were far from perfect. Turnovers piled up, shots missed their mark, and for nearly the entire game, Zachary played from behind.

None of that mattered in the end.





Because when the championship hung in the balance, the Broncos trusted their senior leader, and Raymond delivered the only basket that truly mattered. Her floater gave Zachary its only lead of the fourth quarter and secured back-to-back Division I Non-Select state championships.

“These girls just never give up,” McClure said. “They fought to the bitter end.”

Moments like that are what make high school sports special. In an era where the professional and college games can sometimes feel distant, high school athletics remain one of the truest forms of sport. The emotions are real, the stakes feel enormous to the athletes competing, and entire communities rally behind the teams that represent them.

Few places embody that spirit quite like Zachary.

Over the past several years, the Broncos’ athletic programs have steadily become one of the most consistent forces in Louisiana high school sports. From football to track to basketball, Zachary athletes continue to compete for championships and push the standard higher across multiple sports within the LHSAA. Just last season, the boys basketball team stood on this same stage, lifting a trophy, and as basketball season comes to a close this year, the Broncos’ boys program is currently preparing for the boys state tournament as the No. 1 seed heading into the semifinal game on Thursday night.

Success like that rarely happens by accident. It reflects a culture of belief within a school and a community that shows up, supports its teams, and celebrates moments like the one Raymond delivered.

But the best thing I saw at state wasn’t the stat line, the trophy presentation, or even the shot that ended the game. It was the moment when a championship slowed down, the ball found the right player, and a senior delivered for the team and community that believed in her.

For nearly six days and 29 games, I had been searching for that moment.

It turns out it was waiting for me in the final seconds of the final game.

And it belonged to Ava Raymond.

**Author’s Note:***In my role as the Director of Communications, I have the unique privilege of attending nearly all sanctioned LHSAA State Championship events. Although the schedule is demanding, I have the privilege of seeing student-athletes from all walks of life, united by two things: their participation in Louisiana high school sports and their pursuit of a state championship. In my first year in this role, I’ve gained a deeper appreciation for high school athletics and for all the dedication that goes into making each season and event possible. Although my current role involves less writing than my previous positions, it has given me the opportunity to return to something I’ve always loved. While much of my work now focuses on press releases and public statements, I also have the chance to reconnect with my passion for feature writing, this time highlighting what I consider the purest form of sport: high school athletics. The goal is to highlight the best thing I saw at each state championship and share the unknown stories behind these events, capturing memorable moments for student-athletes, coaches, administrators, officials, and fans.*