

For Wash girls, it's 'us against the world'

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 24 February 2013 22:06 - Last Updated Sunday, 24 February 2013 22:07



The Cedar Rapids Washington girls basketball team enjoyed a happy ride home from Ankeny last Tuesday night after they upset No.6 Waukee in the regional finals to claim a spot in the Class 5A state tournament.

"It was loud," senior Abby Herb reported. "We were happy and really excited."

The Warriors overcame severe foul problems, a technical foul and a two-hour bus ride to knock off Waukee, which only had to travel from one side of the Des Moines suburbs to another for the pivotal game against Washington.

"We kind of came in with an 'us against the world' mentality," said Washington Coach Frank Howell. "I think we were successful having that mindset, so we're just going to try and have that same mindset. I think it's going to loosen us up a little bit."

The Warriors were supposed to have played for the regional title in Newton, which would have been more of a neutral court, but the game was switched to Ankeny when Newton discovered it had a scheduling conflict with a middle school event.

The Warriors survived that assignment, but now they'll be returning to Des Moines this week for an even tougher task.

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Washington (17-6) will face No.2 Ankeny (19-4) in the first round of the state tournament Wednesday at 1:30 p.m. at the Wells Fargo Arena. Now they'll face a tougher opponent in a tougher environment, but that's OK with them.

"Our attitude at this point is, 'Go ahead, keep throwing obstacles our way,'" said Howell. "We're going to try to find a way to get over them or around them or through them."

Ankeny has won 10 state titles in school history, including six titles under Coach Scott DeJong. Washington won state titles in 1988 and 1995, and Howell led the Warriors to second-place finishes in 2005, 2006 and 2008.

Washington reached the state tournament in 2011, but lost to Iowa City West in the opening round.

Herb was an impressionable sophomore two years ago when the Warriors played in the state tournament. She remembers walking into the Wells Fargo Arena for the game and being very impressed.

"It was just so cool. The locker rooms are huge!," she said, smiling. "It was just great for me."

Herb and senior Madison Kramer are the only two members of this year's team who played in that game against Iowa City West. Dani Franklin, a junior, sat in the stands and watched, but this time she'll play a prominent role as the team's leading scorer and rebounder.

"It's almost like a dream come true to finally get to do it," she said. "Getting to see them play, it's what we want to do. We want to be there."

Franklin said she's wanted to play in the state tournament since she was a little girl.

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"Since I started playing," she said. "Once you play basketball and see everyone else at that level, that's what I wanted to do."

Howell has compiled a 178-60 record in 10 years at Washington and has an overall mark of 299-149 at Dallas Center-Grimes, Audubon and Washington. If the Warriors defeat Ankeny Wednesday, he'll be able to celebrate his 300th career win in style.

The Class 5A semifinals will be played Friday with the finals on Saturday night.

Howell likes the way his team is playing, except for one area.

"We've got to rebound better if we're going to have a chance to win the whole thing," he remarked.