

Saunders hustles J-Hawks into substate final

Written by Carl Gonder

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If Jarrod Uthoff is Iowa's "Mr. Basketball", then Alec Saunders should get votes for the "Mr. Hustle Award." If there is such a thing.

The No. 8-ranked Jefferson J-Hawks got a stellar 27-point, 15-rebound performance from MVP-candidate Uthoff and a blue-collar-lunch-bucket display from Saunders to defeat a pesky Western Dubuque team, 60-50, in a Class 4A substate semifinal at Jefferson High School Friday night.

Jefferson (16-5) plays Waterloo West (9-14) Tuesday night at the McLeod Center in Cedar Falls in the substate final for the right to go to the state tournament. Waterloo West upset Cedar Falls, 52-49, Friday night.

Saunders drained two 3-pointers and had 11 points, three steals and three assists, including a number of outstanding "effort plays" that won't show up in the boxscore.

"I try and get out and beat everyone down the floor," the 5-foot-11 junior said. "I try and lead everyone else to get more pumped up."

Saunders said Uthoff is the best player in the state.

"I look up to him and try to be like him," he said. "I think he is the best."

A panel of newspaper writers from around the state will cast votes for the Mr. Basketball Award following the state tournament. Uthoff is a leading candidate.

Saunders and the J-Hawks have their sights set on more than just winning their next game.

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"I think we can win it all," Saunders said. "With the amount of talent we have with Uthoff and him getting the ball and then kicking it out, I think we can win state."

Uthoff, the state's top scorer at 26.2 points per game, demonstrated his versatility by draining a pair of 3-pointers early and scoring eight of his team's 14 first-quarter points. He also had three blocked shots on the night and helped the hosts to a 33-21 edge on the boards.

Jefferson hit four 3-pointers in the opening stanza and six in the first half. The J-Hawks finished with seven behind-the-arc bombs.

Uthoff had nothing but praise for Saunders.

"He's really scrappy and he really hustles a lot. He went full court for a ball and threw it over his head off of another player. That was insane," Uthoff said of a key play Saunders made with 2:21 left and the J-Hawks holding a nine-point lead.

"They are a really tough team," Uthoff said. "It was a good game."

Uthoff said he isn't thinking about any awards.

"That is really not my concern right now," he said. "I want to see how far we can get as a team."

The biggest story of the game might have been Western Dubuque Coach Dennis Geraghty's decision to bench leading scoring Zach Otting (19.9 ppg) after he received a technical foul with 5:22 to play in the third quarter. Otting, one of the best players in the Wamac Conference, did not play again. He scored a team-high 12 points.

"That's our rule and I've had it for 30 years, if you get a technical you are finished for the night,"

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Geraghty said. "My star player who scores 1,300 points (career), I have to sit him. If I don't, I shouldn't have the rule."

Geraghty said it was the first technical one his players had received this season.

"He (Otting) looked at me in the locker room and I said, 'Zach you must not know me very well if you thought you were going back in,' " Geraghty said.

Geraghty added, "There are only two guys I know who had that rule. My best friend who has passed away, (the late) Denny Thiessen had the same rule. We went to St. Ambrose together. Unfortunately for Zach (Otting), I am not putting him back in."

Western Dubuque (16-7) came in with a nine-game winning streak and is the smallest 4A school. They will likely drop to Class 3A next year.

"For being the smallest 4A school and to have to come here and play against a Big Ten player, I couldn't have been prouder of our guys," Geraghty said. "We could have folded our tent when Zach went out and we didn't."

Jefferson used a 14-0 run in the second quarter to lead 31-20 at halftime, but the Bobcats hung around and made a game of it. Western Dubuque won the second half, 30-29.

With the game still in doubt, Saunders hit a big 3-point basket from the deep corner to make it 51-40. He then got a huge ovation from J-Hawk fans for his diving hustle play (throwing the ball off a Bobcat player), all in a span of about 60 seconds. Uthoff then made five three throws in the final 1:15 to ice the win.

Jefferson boss Stu Ordman admires the blue-collar play of Saunders.

"He has always been undersized in the post, but he is our hardest (working) practice player. He

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always tries his hardest,” Ordman said. “Boy, he made a lot of good hustle plays tonight.”

Ordman admitted he is biased, but thinks Uthoff is deserving of the Mr. Basketball Award. The 6-foot-8 senior will play at the University of Wisconsin next season.

“I haven’t seen everyone play,” he said. “Jarrod has great character off and on the court. Whoever selects (for that award) has to look at his great character, too. He would be a great ambassador, but we are much more focused on getting our team to state. Basketball is a team sport.”

Jefferson students swarmed the players after the game and joined the team in a “group high five” celebration. Ordman is hoping there will be much more to celebrate.

“I told my staff that Waterloo West is kind of a spooky team,” Ordman said of his next opponent. “They really have been playing better and they do some unusual things. They are very athletic. It speaks to how tough the Mississippi Valley Conference is. The tough competition served us well tonight.”

WESTERN DUBUQUE (50): Logan Pitz 2 6-7 10, TJ Lake 4 0-0 10, Zach Otting 3 5-5 12, Sam Hoeger 2 1-2 7, Cameron James 0 5-6 5, Nick Tuttle 1 0-0 3, Hunter Westhoff 1 1-1 3. Totals 11 18-21 50.

JEFFERSON (60): Tyler Meiborg 3 1-3 8, Tyler Hemphill 1 0-0 3, Ky Kramer 3 0-0 6, Taylor Olson 1 2-2 5, Alec Saunders 4 1-1 11, Jarrod Uthoff 8 9-11 27. Totals 20 13-19 60.

Halftime -- Jefferson 31, Western Dubuque 20. 3-point goals -- Western Dubuque 6 (Lake 2, Hoeger 2, Otting, Tuttle), Jefferson 7 (Uthoff 2, Saunders 2, Meiborg, Hemphill, Olson).