

## Best birthday present? A trip to state

Written by Jim Ecker

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Kasey Semler got the only present he wanted for his 18th birthday Monday night at the U.S. Cellular Center.

He can thank Dusty Albaugh and the rest of his buddies on the Marion High School basketball team for giving him a trip to the Class 3A state tournament in Des Moines.

Albaugh popped in 21 points and Semler netted 15 as the Indians trimmed Benton Community, 48-44, in the Class 3A substate finals before several thousand fans in downtown Cedar Rapids.

Marion (17-7) will face No.1 Waverly-Shell Rock (24-0) in the first round of the Class 3A state tournament on Tuesday, March 8 at 3:30 p.m. at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

Marion is seeded eighth in the eight-team tournament and Waverly-Shell Rock is seeded No.1, but the Indians embraced the challenge of facing the favorite club.

"We'll be ready to go," vowed Albaugh, who popped in four 3-pointers. "We want to see the best. We want to match ourselves up with them. It will be a good game."

It certainly was a good birthday for Semler, who played in the 2009 state tournament as a sophomore and was itching for icing on his cake Monday night.

"This is exactly what I wanted," he said.

Marion led by a single digit at halftime, 23-22, but Albaugh and Semler took matters into their own hands in the third quarter when the Indians outscored the Bobcats 13-4. Albaugh and Semler combined for all 13 points as Marion grabbed a 36-26 advantage.

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"That's just them being seniors," said Marion Coach Mike Manderscheid. "They've got enough experience in the tournament to know what needs to be done.

"We've relied on them all year. That's no secret," he said.

Albaugh scored seven points in the third period and Semler added six.

"It started getting close and the first thing I said to Kasey, 'We're not going to let this happen again,' " said Albaugh, referring to a 57-56 loss to Benton Community in January. "We're not getting in a close game, we need to get in the lead and just run with it."

That's exactly what they did.

"You have to give a lot of credit to 10 and 21, you know, Albaugh and Semler," said Benton Community Coach Larry Carlson, referring to their uniform numbers. "They did a great job."

Marion opened a 41-28 lead with 6 minutes left in the game, but the physical Bobcats (16-8) battled back and clawed within 45-40 with 44 seconds left on a basket by Brady Stramer.

The Indians missed two free throws and Zach Twedt pulled Benton Community within 45-41 with one foul shot with 22 seconds remaining. Twedt missed his second free throw and Albaugh dove for the loose ball, getting a timeout and possession with 18 seconds left.

Dan Van Gorp made two free throws for Marion with 17 seconds remaining for a 47-41 advantage. Twedt missed a 3-pointer and Van Gorp got fouled again, this time making it 48-41 with 8 seconds left and clinching the game.

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Mitch Lester hit a 3-pointer for the Bobcats with 2 seconds left to make it 48-44, which is where it ended.

The Indians celebrated the victory with hundreds of Marion students who attended the game, then headed to the locker room for a quick meeting to discuss their achievement and their spot in the Class 3A state tournament.

"It feels great," said Semler, one of the top players in school history. "I've been telling these guys, you don't know what it's like. It's an awesome feeling to get to state. I'm just so happy to be able to go down there."

This will be Marion High School's fourth appearance in the boys state tournament. The Indians made the tournament in 1950 and 1952, then had a 57-year drought before going back in 2009.

"It's the best feeling in the world," said Albaugh. "You fight through this last game and it's the biggest dream in the world. You get to go to state again, like we did sophomore year."

"We want to go and not be one-and-done again. We want to go and have a nice, long run."

The Indians lost by one point to Carroll in the first round in 2009. They know they'll be heavy underdogs against Waverly-Shell Rock, but the Indians haven't lost a game since January and will take an eight-game winning streak to Des Moines.

"We'll break down tape on them (Waverly), make sure our kids are ready to play, make sure they're focused," said Manderscheid. "I know they're big, I know they're athletic, I know they've got a lot of depth."

"We have a tough task ahead of us, but I'll take these seven seniors and put them up against anything right now."

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The other first-round games in the 3A state tournament are Dallas Center-Grimes (22-2) vs. Norwalk (21-3), Sioux City Heelan (22-2) vs. Dubuque Wahlert (18-6), and Mount Pleasant (22-2) vs. MOC-Floyd Valley (21-3). The semifinals are Thursday and the finals Saturday.

MARION (48): Albaugh 8 1-1 21, Fisher 1 1-4 3, Cronk 1 0-0 2, Semler 5 4-6 15, Van Gorp 2 3-4 7, Stone 0 0-0 0, Hardman 0 0-0 0, Wagner 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 9-15 48.

BENTON (44): Lester 1 4-4 7, Twedt 5 2-4 12, Markland 5 0-0 11, Stenberg 0 0-0 0, Rathje 2 1-2 5, Kearns 1 2-2 4, Stramer 2 0-0 5, Thompson 0 0-0 0. Totals 16 9-12 44.

Halftime -- Marion 23, Benton 22. 3-point goals -- Marion 5 (Albaugh 4, Semler), Benton 3 (Lester, Markland, Stramer).