

Dogged Linn-Mar falls short against Senior

Written by Clete Campbell

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DUBUQUE – It was a classic playoff role reversal, the long-hunted becoming the giant hunter.

The Linn-Mar Lions, who punched numerous state tickets by hurdling underdog Dubuque Senior teams in past substate battles, found themselves on Tuesday night looking up and up against the towering and Class 4A top-ranked Rams on Dubuque soil.

The Lions weren't giving an inch while putting white-knuckle fear of playoff eviction in the eyes of Rams fans looking for their team's third consecutive state tournament berth.

Completely neutralizing Senior's vaunted post game for much of a thrilling Class 4A Substate 3 final, Linn-Mar pushed the Rams to the brink before Rams all-state guard Kyle Haber took over late and elevated No. 1 Senior to a breathless 52-47 triumph before a standing-room-only crowd of 2,200 at Hempstead High's Moody Gym.

"I told them two things afterward: I was proud of the fight in the dog and the dog in the fight," Lions Coach Chris Robertson said. "Our kids fought and fought and fought tonight."

Haber's 8-foot jumper with 2:15 left gave Senior a 44-42 advantage and the lead for good and Rams center Lucas LeGrand's four free throws in the final 21.8 seconds kept Senior a step ahead to the finish in a twist-filled drama that saw 11 lead changes and 11 ties.

"We went toe-for-toe with the best team in the state for 31 minutes," said Lions guard Jordan Bohannon, who went for a team-high 21 points in a tireless performance. "In the last minute, we let it slip away."

It was only in the final 60 seconds where Linn-Mar couldn't isolate and quiet Senior's powerhouse interior game. The trio of 6-foot-9 Luke McDonnell, 6-9 Seth Bonifas and 6-5 LeGrand managed just 13 combined points over the first three quarters as junior post man

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Ryan Schmidt and swing man Jon Schlotterback neutralized Senior's big men with pitch-perfect defensive positioning and rebounding.

"We had to work out on them early," Schmidt said. "If you let them get the ball inside there's nothing really you can do to stop them."

Part 2 of Linn-Mar's game plan was to beat Senior from downtown. The Lions' kinetic 7-for-15 first-half 3-point shooting enabled them to take a 32-31 lead into halftime. Bohannon sunk three first-half treys and Nic Uhlir (who delivered a terrific 16-point performance) and Lane Halupnik hit two each as Linn-Mar forced Senior Coach Wendell Eimers to rewrite his team's defensive strategy at halftime.

"At halftime we talked about being more disciplined and staying on their shooters and making them drive," said Eimers, whose 22-1 club draws West Des Moines Valley (15-8) in the state quarterfinals next Wednesday. "Luckily, our defense was just outstanding in the second half. We held them to 15 points."

After a fast-paced first half, the game became all about defense in the second half. Linn-Mar saw its wide-open 3-point looks dry up as it went just 1-for-7 from the arc. And the Lions found little water while driving the lane. Bohannon shot just 3-for-13 over the final 16 minutes. No miss was more costly than Bohannon's missed lane runner with 39 seconds left and the Lions trailing 46-44. The rebound went long and a relentless Bohannon nearly tracked it down before the ball skipped out of bounds and set Senior up with the lead and the ball with 35 seconds left.

Forced to foul, Linn-Mar tagged LeGrand, a 72-percent free throw shooter who had missed a pair of free throws 28 seconds earlier. LeGrand (who had 14 points) was calm and clutch as he knocked down both chances with 21.8 seconds to give Senior a two-possession lead. His foul shots with 6.6 seconds left stretched the Rams' advantage to six points at 50-44.

"I always want the ball down the stretch and want to shoot those free throws," said LeGrand, whose last-second tipback in last year's substate final sent Senior to state. "I'm a pretty decent free throw shooter. When I missed those two I was a little scared, but when I made the next one I knew (all my free throws) would be good."

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Bohannon and Linn-Mar weren't about to tap out. Bohannon hit a pullup 3 from the right wing with 0.9 seconds left to draw the Lions within 50-47. But Haber iced the game and sealed the Rams' return to state by draining both of his free throws with 0.4 seconds left. Haber's 22 points fronted Senior.

"It was a dog fight the whole way," Eimers said. "Offensively, in the second half we did just enough to get the job done."

Linn-Mar's past playoff mastery over Senior included an epic, Marcus Paige-engineered classic in 2012 state quarterfinals. But that setback energized the Rams' Cinderella-like emergence into a major state player. Senior is 46-3 since the Lions last tamed them, while Linn-Mar reloads in the post-Paige era. Still, Eimers said his club may have had its home court edge to thank for its surviving its longtime playoff foil Tuesday.

"That might have been the difference," Eimers said.

This razor-close cliffhanger was an entirely different game than Senior's 66-41 roughhousing of Linn-Mar on Dec. 17. Learning from that blowout and starting early, the Lions' young core learned what it is capable of Tuesday night.

"It was a great experience and a lesson of how good we can be if we can come out with a ton of energy and hit them in the mouth early," Schmidt said.

The Lions closed a fine season 13-10. But at Linn-Mar, no season that ends short of Des Moines is considered a true success. Now, the Lions know what it will take to return to the stage they dominated on for so much of the 21st century. Linn-Mar projects to return four of its five starters next year.

"This was an eye-opening experience for our young guys about what it is going to take to finish the job," Robertson said. "We're pretty excited about what we have coming back and hopefully

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they can take what they learned from tonight. Hopefully, next year we're the veteran team making plays down the stretch."

LINN-MAR (47): Nic Uhler 5-13 4-5 16, Riley Murphy 0-1 0-0 0, Trevor Noble 0-1 0-0 0, Jordan Bohannon 8-21 0-0 21, Ben Larson 0-2 0-0 0, Jon Schlotterback 0-1 0-0 0, Lane Halupnik 2-5 0-0 6, Ryan Schmidt 2-3 0-0 4, Jordan Brandt 0-1 0-0 0. Totals 17-48 4-5 47.

DUBUQUE SENIOR (52): Sam Noel 2-4 2-3 6, Parker Hammel 0-1 0-0 0, Kyle Haber 6-9 9-11 22, Seth Bonifas 0-1 2-2 2, Luke McDonnell 2-6 2-2 6, Lucas LeGrand 3-7 7-10 13, Keaton Hermesen 0-1 0-0 0, Jayden Davis 1-1 0-0 2. Totals 14-30 22-28 51.

Halftime - Linn-Mar 32, Senior 31. 3-point goals - Linn-Mar 8-23 (Bohannon 4, Uhler 2, Halupnik 2), Senior 2-6 (Haber, Noel). Rebounds - Senior 24, Linn-Mar 20. Turnovers - Senior 11, Linn-Mar 5. Fouls - Linn-Mar 25, Senior 17. Attendance - 2,200.