

## Cougars topped by Sioux City North

Written by Bill Seals

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DES MOINES - The same hot shooting that contributed to Cedar Rapids Kennedy's four-game winning streak and Class 4A state basketball tournament berth nearly led to an upset victory over Sioux City North in a first-round contest Wednesday night.

But those shots stopped falling during a brief fourth-period stretch, allowing the Stars to pull away from the Cougars, 75-65, at Wells Fargo Arena.

It was a heartbreaking conclusion to head coach Jon McKowen's first season at the helm of the Kennedy program. His team never backed down, even after facing an early 10-0 deficit where nothing seemed to go right.

"What hurts is we were in good position, but just one step away," said McKowen. "It's probably fatigue - the bigger court, excitement and emotions are really tough. Being one step slow, you put yourself in that position.

"We're a team that flies around and our kids did a good job of doing that. The kids continued to battle. They didn't hang their heads and continued to give themselves a chance."

The Cougar shooters were unfazed playing on the state's biggest stage, knocking down 8-of-18 3-pointers on the night. Zach Daniels (4-of-6) and Cole Murdock (3-of-5) helped keep their team in the hunt, and leading scorer Anthony Carter caught fire after a slow start to finish with a team-high 17 points against a Sioux City North team that entered the tournament with a

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regular season mark of 21-3.

"Everyone had confidence in each other," said Carter. "We made the extra pass to wide open shooters. We found each other for good looks and made shots.

"They liked to jump out and hedge ball screens, and then they also got lost on off-ball screens and didn't pop out enough and help out. We found the open spot with great passes and knocked down shots."

After Murdock nailed his last 3-pointer to tie it at 58-58 with 5:13 remaining, Stars guard Deontre Dean answered with a three of his own to get North started on a decisive 7-0 run. Xavier Scarlett hit a short jumper and Daniel Tillo converted on a pair of free throw attempts.

Kennedy trailed 65-58 with 3:34 to play and the Cougars would get no closer than four the rest of the way.



Just finding a defensive solution for Kennedy's outside shooting was enough for the Stars to win their first state tournament game in 31 years.

"We just had to get stops," said North head coach Cody Fisher. "They had some guys that were just unconscious from threes, so we really had to make sure we had those guys contested. If they hit a contested shot then, 'congratulations'.

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"We had to focus on contesting shots and getting rebounds. When we're able to do that and get out and run, we're way more effective."

The Cougars had no trouble keeping up with the frenetic pace for much of the night, but slipped a little as North started to pull away.

"We just sped up a little too fast," Carter said. "We always want to push the ball, but we got ahead of ourselves at the end. They made some great shots against our defense and I congratulate them. If we would have made a few more shots down the stretch, it could have been a different story."

The final 4A first-round game of the night could just as easily have been a rout, as North pulled out to an early 10-0 lead while Kennedy struggled getting out of the gate with two turnovers, a missed layup and two missed free throws from Daniels.

Austin Holzer's layup at the 5:51 mark finally got the Cougars on the board, and North struggled to sustain its early momentum when leading scorer and rebounder Tillo sprained his left ankle.

With the bleeding stopped, Kennedy held its own and chipped away at the margin thanks to three first-half 3-pointers from Daniels.

"Zach got hot, put himself in position and his teammates kept getting him the ball in great looks," McKowen said. "He shot the ball really well the past two weeks. (As a team) a lot of that 31 percent (3-point shooting percentage this season) comes from before Christmas and after then we've done a lot better. We're a good 3-point shooting team."

North moves on to face West Des Moines Valley, which finished off an upset of its own against Dubuque Senior in the first game of the evening on Friday. Iowa City West will play Bettendorf in the other semifinal Friday.

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Fisher hopes he'll be getting a Tillo that's close to 100 percent. The junior forward battled through his injury to post a double-double (17 points and 11 rebounds), but had a noticeable limp after the game.

"It feels amazing," said Tillo of his team's victory. "Last year we were a little scared of the big moment, and this year everyone played really great. We're pumped for Friday."

Kennedy ends its season with an 18-6 record, but with plenty to build on for McKowen's second season as coach.

"We're really going to miss these seniors," he said. "The leadership these seniors had and their unselfishness will be missed. I thank everyone for the effort they put in all year. A lot of teams would love to be in Des Moines with a chance to win a game and move on.

"The first time I met these guys - the goal was to play in Des Moines and we had a plan of a way to try to get there. They bought in from day one and continued it through today."

KENNEDY (65): Daniels 5 2-6 16, Carter 7 2-3 17, Jacobus 0 0-0 0, Murdock 3 0-1 9, Heitland 1 2-2 4, Cook 0 0-0 0, Bill 0 0-0 0, Bardsley 4 3-5 11, Bell 0 0-0 0, Buck 0 0-0 0, Heisler 1 2-4 4, Hall 0 0-00, Odom 0 0-0 0, Holzer 2 0-0 4. Totals 23 11-21 65.

SIOUX CITY NORTH (75): Scarlett 8 1-1 19, Elizalde 2 1-4 5, Dean 7 1-1 16, Bennett 3 1-1 7, Tillo 5 5-6 17, Billings 0 0-0 0, Najdawi 0 1-2 1, Neustrom 4 2-2 10. Totals 29 12-17 75.

Halftime - Sioux City North 36, Kennedy 30. 3-point goals - Kennedy 8 (Daniels 4, Murdock 3, Carter 1), Sioux City North 5 (Scarlett 2, Tillo 2, Dean 1). Fouled out - Daniels.