

Linn-Mar girls prevail without Mykaela Brandt

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Linn-Mar Coach Michael Brandt knew coming into the season there'd be some big adjustments to make.

Besides losing starters Jenna Eells and Kailee Karr from a state tournament team that went 22-3, no longer would there be towering All-American Kiah Stokes to carry the load.

One thing Brandt could count on was his own daughter Mykaela, a 5-foot-6 junior sparkplug who figured to take over at point guard. Then he found out Monday night his floor leader would be lost for Tuesday night's opener against Keokuk with a broken nose and slight concussion.

Of all things, she was accidentally injured Saturday at home while babysitting. It's a good bet that Stokes' new coach at Connecticut, Geno Auriemma, hasn't faced that situation in his career.

"We did have to make some last-minute changes in our rotation," Brandt said after a sometimes sloppy 51-41 win over the Class 3A Chiefs from southeast Iowa.

"With Mykaela out, our plans kind of went out the window. But we've got a lot of new kids in there. And I thought they adjusted pretty well," he said.

Brandt said the challenge of starting over with a new group of players is what he enjoys about high school coaching.

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"It's exciting to take what we have and hope the kids learn to come together as a team. You want them to mesh together, to develop a team chemistry. I think we'll get there," he said.

Against an undersized but physical Keokuk bunch, the Lions looked a little rattled at times in the first half. Both teams shot poorly and had trouble holding onto the ball.

At one point, animated and excitable Keokuk Coach Mike Davis exhorted his girls, "Hurry up and shoot it before you lose it."

Whatever Davis told his team at halftime seemed to energize them. Keokuk scored 10 straight points, quickly erased a four-point deficit and led 36-34 at the end of three quarters.

The final stanza belonged to the Lions, though. They outscored the Chiefs 17-5 in the fourth period.

"I was proud of the way that after getting down, they battled back," Brandt said. "They just kept plugging away and were able to hold the lead."

With Keokuk playmakers Alexis Lozano-Dobbs and Katie Edwardson on the bench after fouling out, Linn-Mar held the Chiefs to one basket and three free throws in the fourth quarter. At the same time, the Lions converted on nine of 11 from the stripe (and 15 of 19 for the game) to salt away the victory.

"We were kind of anxious and running our plays too quickly at the start," said Linn-Mar senior Shanice Cheatham, a starter this season after being hurt much of last year. "But we settled down in the second half." She led all scorers with 16 points.

Courtney Major, who had 10 points, said the defense picked up as the game went along, as well. "We started talking and communicating with each other. And our help on defense was a lot better," she said.

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For the game, the Lions outrebounded Keokuk 30-23 and held an 11-5 edge on offensive boards. Sara Strauel collected eight rebounds and Rachel Thrune had seven. Strauel also led Linn-Mar in assists with five.

KEOKUK (41): Zoe Kayvan 4 2-2 11, Mollie Martin 1 2-4 5, Merydith Marshall 2 2-2 6, Alexis Lozano-Dobbs 6 1-2 13, Rachel Dunlap 0 0-0 0, Katie Edwardson 2 1-2 6, Trisha Elder 0 0-0 0, Chelsea Deyo 0 0-5 0. Totals 15 8-17 41.

LINN-MAR (51): Hannah Yearling 1 2-4 4, Sara Strauel 2 3-4 7, Rachel Thrune 2 0-0 4, Shanice Cheatham 7 2-2 16, Courtney Major 1 7-7 10, Jenna Harms 0 0-0 0, Kristen Eiles 3 1-2 8, Carly Ryder 0 0-0 0, Alexis Libenguth 1 0-0 2. Totals 17 15-19 51.

Halftime – Linn-Mar 26, Keokuk 20. 3-point goals – Keokuk 3 (Kayvan, Edwardson, Martin), Linn-Mar 2 (Major, Eiles). Total fouls – Keokuk 18, Linn-Mar 17. Fouled out – Lozano-Dobbs, Edwardson.