

No. 7 Kennedy girls escape J-Hawks

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Kennedy girls basketball team has a bona fide star in Lela Sellers, but the Cougars showed Tuesday night they can win a tough game on the road with Sellers having a relatively quiet game.

The seventh-ranked Cougars rallied from an eight-point deficit in the second half and escaped the Jefferson J-Hawks, 56-43, in a Mississippi Valley Conference game at the Jefferson gym.

Sellers scored only three points in the second half -- all on free throws -- but Kennedy dug a little deeper into its portfolio to head home with a glossy 17-3 record.

Carly Langhurst, Ashley Hamilton, Hailey Dolphin and Linden Runels all made clutch baskets during a 15-0 run as the Cougars wiped out a 38-30 deficit and surged into a 45-38 lead to turn the game around.

Langhurst and Hamilton began the 15-0 run with a pair of 3-pointers.

"That shows we play as a team," said Langhurst, who doubled her season average with 11 points. "We have a lot of girls that will step up. Even the bench will step up."

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Kennedy held Jefferson to just five points during the last 11 minutes of the game, spanning the final three minutes of the third period and all eight minutes of the fourth stanza. The Cougars outscored the J-Hawks, 26-5, during that stretch.

"I just think our team has a really positive attitude," Langhurst said. "We know we have to fight and we will fight. We're a team that will come out and fight and get what we want."



Sellers scored 10 points in the first half, but did not make a field goal in the second half. She scored one point during the 15-0 spurt, but continued to play strong defense and grab rebounds.

Sellers and Sydney Hayden led Kennedy with 13 points apiece, but all eight of their players scored at least three points. The Cougars sizzled on 3-pointers, hitting 9 of 15 for 60 percent. Hayden was 3-for-3 from long range.

The Cougars appeared to be in trouble with Jefferson playing well and holding its 38-30 lead, but the visitors turned the game around.

"When the 3's go down quickly, you can make up a deficit in a hurry," said Kennedy coach Tony Vis. "We were wobbly. Down 38-30, we were very, very nervous. It didn't look like us."

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"Then all of a sudden some shots go down and you start to play with some confidence."

Jefferson (9-11) did a good job on defense against Sellers, a 6-foot senior who will play Division I basketball at Liberty University next season. The J-Hawks made it tough for Kennedy to feed Sellers in the post and they also cut off her lanes to the basket when she had the ball on the perimeter.

Kennedy trailed 33-24 early in the third period, but Kendal Meier and Hayden hit 3-pointers to pull the Cougars within 33-30. Jefferson spurred to its 38-30 lead, but the Cougars stormed back with their 15-0 run.

"Other kids had to step up and make shots and tonight we have to give credit to those other kids," said Vis. "It says what we've been saying all year long: We're a team."

"When we put a kid on the floor, we know that kid can help us. Whether it's a rebound, whether it's a basket, whatever the case may be. That's the sign of a good team, because in February and hopefully into March, we're going to have to have some kids step up and make shots."

Jefferson outscored Kennedy 17-6 in the second quarter to grab a 29-24 lead at halftime, and the J-Hawks scored the first four points of the second half for their 33-24 advantage to finish a 21-6 run.

Jefferson coach Jason Edwards knew his club could not relax against the seventh-ranked team in the state, however.

"We told them at halftime, there's nothing more insignificant than the halftime score," Edwards said. "A good team like Kennedy came out and made

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the adjustments and played with more energy in the second half and they got on a run.

"They hit some shots tonight, too," he said. "I think we had them 9 for 15 on 3's. And some kids who don't normally make 3's made 3's for them. That's what good teams do. They step up at key times."

Edwards liked the way his club played against Sellers, with Sam Kitterman leading the defensive effort with help from her teammates. "I liked our defense," he said. "I thought we guarded them really well."

Erin Kuba pulled Jefferson within 45-41 with a 3-pointer with 3:42 left in the game, but Hayden hit a 3-pointer for Kennedy and swished four straight free throws to make it 52-41 with 1:32 remaining.

Kaylee Donner and Kennedy Dighton led Jefferson with 11 points apiece.

KENNEDY (56): Langhurst 3 3-4 11, Hamilton 2 0-0 5, Hayden 3 4-4 13, Sellers 3 6-8 13, Hellweg 1 0-0 3, Dolphin 1 3-4 5, Runels 1 1-2 3, Meier 1 0-0 3. Totals 15 17-22 56.

JEFFERSON (43): Kitterman 0 2-2 2, Guy 1 0-0 2, Donner 4 1-2 11, Wise 1 0-0 3, Melton 1 0-0 2, Kuba 2 0-0 6, Erica Oler 0 0-0 0, Dighton 3 5-6 11, Emily Oler 2 2-2 6, O'Brien 0 0-0 0. Totals 14 10-12 43.

Halftime - Jefferson 29, Kennedy 24. 3-point goals - Kennedy 9 (Hayden 3, Langhurst 2, Hamilton 1, Sellers 1, Hellweg 1, Meier 1), Jefferson 5 (Donner 2, Kuba 2, Wise 1).