

Kennedy girls ousted by Waterloo West

Written by Nick Petaros, Waterloo Courier

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WATERLOO -- Cedar Rapids Kennedy came out bombing 3-pointers from seemingly every corner of Siddens Gymnasium. Not to be outdone, Waterloo West's Haley Puk and company answered with a hot-handed approach of their own during Saturday's Class 5A Region 3 semifinal.

West scored 30 second-quarter points, overcoming a 22-7 first-quarter deficit, before making key shots down the stretch en route to a thrilling 66-59 victory.

The Wahawks (16-6) advance to face Des Moines East at 7 p.m. Tuesday in Saydel.

"I'm just so proud of all of our players here tonight I can't tell you," West Coach Tony Pappas said after his team outscored Kennedy by 22 points over the final three quarters.

Kennedy (15-8), a winner of its previous seven games, hit its first six shots from 3-point range and poured in nine treys in the opening half. But West answered with points on 12 of its 13 second-quarter possessions to tie the game at 37 heading into intermission.

Puk, the Wahawks' 6-foot guard, led the charge as she finished with a game-high 27 points and didn't miss a shot after the start of the second quarter. Three of Puk's five 3-pointers came in the second stanza, while her fourth bucket of the quarter was a clutch traditional three-point play resulting from an offensive rebound off a missed free throw.

"It started with my teammates setting me up well," Puk said. "They did really good with their screens. Then once I just kind of started hitting, I just felt the flow."

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"I couldn't ask for a better team. We just played great. We knew we were down, but we didn't give up. We just kept fighting, and we knew we could play better than that. We just played like we could."

In addition to sparking life into West's offense, Puk took over at the point guard position for the game's final two minutes after starter Sammie Sproul fouled out.

"Haley played like an all-stater, no ifs, ands or buts about it," Pappas added. "She made some big plays and she was determined that we weren't going to lose."

Another player to rise to the occasion for West on this night was freshman reserve Jaclyn Spencer. With Kennedy double-teaming Iowa State commit Blaire Thomas in the low post, Spencer hit 4-of-5 jump shots from the free throw line in the second quarter and finished with 12 points.

"If you look in the stats, I don't know if 44 (Spencer) got in a little more than half their games," Kennedy Coach Tony Vis said. "Tonight was her night. If she doesn't do what she does, I think we're having a very different locker room after the game."

"We knew they were going to double Blaire, and she was ready," Puk said, assessing Spencer's effort. "She stepped up."

Despite West's fierce second-quarter charge, Kennedy led 47-42 with 3:49 left in the third period. The Wahawks, however, outscored Kennedy 18-6 over the next eight minutes with Thomas and Sproul each hitting clutch fourth-quarter 3-pointers near the end of that surge.

After Kennedy cut the deficit to 60-57 on Madi Meier's steal and layup with 2:56 to play, West answered with six consecutive points to seal the victory.

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"They weren't nervous, they weren't scared, they didn't turn it over," Puk said of her team's finish. "They just kept their calm and that's what we've got to do."

Paige Hendrickson led Kennedy, with 14 of her 16 points coming in the first half. Jordan Holmes chipped in 13 points, Brianna Vis had 11 and Meier added 10. The Cougars shot just 6 of 25 in the second half and were unable to connect from 3-point range over that time span.

Taking pride in his team's strong finish despite key injuries, Kennedy Coach Vis knows he will have plenty of talented players ready for another strong charge next season. Four starters from Saturday's game will return to the Cougars' lineup.

"I feel like we have the groundwork set and we've got a lot of kids back next year," Vis said. "We've got a very bright future ahead of us."

KENNEDY (59): Madi Meier 3 2-2 10, Jordan Holmes 4 3-4 13, Brianna Vis 4 3-4 11, Taylor Wagner 0 0-0 0, Paige Hendrickson 5 2-2 16, Steph Botkin 3 3-4 9. Totals 19 13-16 59.

WATERLOO WEST (66): Sammie Sproul 2 0-0 5, Makayla Stokes 0 0-0 0, Haley Puk 9 4-6 27, Hannah Swartzendruber 1 0-0 2, Kate Letkewicz 4 2-2 11, Blaire Thomas 3 1-4 9, Jaclyn Spencer 6 0-0 12. Totals 25 7-12 66. Halftime - Kennedy 37, Waterloo West 37. 3-point goals - Kennedy 9 (Hendrickson 4, Holmes 2, Meier 2, Vis 1), West 9 (Puk 5, Thomas 2, Letkewicz 1, Sproul 1). Fouled out - Sproul.