

Linn-Mar girls clinch tie for MVC title

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Linn-Mar pounded Dubuque Senior, 62-29, Tuesday night to earn its 14th conference win, securing at least a tie for first place in the MVC Mississippi Division with one game remaining in the league schedule.

Waterloo West and Cedar Rapids Washington both trailed the second-ranked Lions by one game to start the evening. Linn-Mar (19-1 overall) will win the title outright with a victory over visiting Washington on Thursday.

In another dominating performance, Linn-Mar super senior Kiah Stokes led all scorers with 33 points, grabbed 16 rebounds and blocked four shots. She needs 22 more blocks to match the state career blocks record of 497 set by Jessica Nikkel of Lynnvile-Sully (1995-99).

The Lions played a decidedly flat first half marked by turnovers and cold shooting. Meanwhile, the Rams responded to Coach Robert Kimble's repeated calls for "patience," managing multiple touches per possession and squeezing out a 7-6 lead to end the first quarter.

The Lions began warming up in the second period and pulled to a 25-16 lead at the half.

"We definitely came out not focused and we were kind of all over the place," said Lions senior guard Kailee Karr, who scored 11 points. "The main thing was defense. You'll have nights where offense is off, and we needed to work it in to Kiah more, but our defense was just really slow, we weren't getting after it, and we can't have that."

Linn-Mar Coach Mike Brandt credited the Rams with playing the better defense to start the game.

"We were kind of running around doing things we don't normally do. We turned the ball over too many times and just didn't get at our bread and butter," he said. "Defensively they did a nice job of really spreading it out and being very, very patient. We got into a chasing match in the first half."

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After the break, the Lions came out energized and made what for their opponents can only be considered a painfully predictable third-period run, dishing the ball repeatedly to Stokes under the basket and smothering the Rams, 21-4, in the quarter.

The Dubuque Senior squad, which started three freshmen along with two seniors, managed only one field goal in the third period and three in the fourth. Katie Sommer – one of a pair of freshman twins playing for the Rams – and Nakiah Kimble each scored seven points to lead their team.

Brandt said his team had not discussed the division title prior to the game, but Thursday's matchup with No.7 Washington undoubtedly brings the conference season to a climax.

"We can have it outright on Thursday if we want to go get it, and that's going to be a huge thing for us," he said. "Then we might talk a little bit about it, but we have bigger goals than that.

"It's going to be a great battle against a great team and no matter what, it's going to really help us get ready to go the last stretch to the tournament."

With last month's perilous three-point victory at Washington clearly on her mind, Stokes said her team will need to concentrate on a couple of critical areas that nearly cost them the last game. "We just need to make our free throws – that's a big one – and stay aggressive the whole game," she said.

"We're all pretty excited about it, but we try not to get overly amped about any certain game," added Karr, capturing her team's mixture of eagerness tempered by the long view. "We just take it one game at a time, but we're definitely ready to go.

"For seniors it's the last regular-season game and it's senior night so we're all excited about that. It'll be fun. But really our main focus is the tournament and it's still a practice game for that."

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Dubuque Senior (4-11, 6-14) plays at Dubuque Wahlert on Thursday.

DUBUQUE SENIOR (29): Reuter 0 0-0 0, Kr. Sommer 2 0-2 5, Powell 0 0-2 0, Noel 0 0-0 0, Ka. Sommer 2 3-4 7, Williams 1 0-0 2, Tigges 2 2-2 6, Kimble 3 0-0 7, Medinger 0 2-2 2. Totals 10 7-12 29.

LINN-MAR (62): Martins 0 0-0 0, Brandt 1 2-2 5, Strauel 1 0-0 2, Thrune 0 0-0 0, Karr 4 2-3 11, Cheatham 2 0-1 4, Eells 2 0-0 5, Major 0 2-2 2, Stokes 15 3-4 33, Seckman 0 0-0 0. Totals 25 9-12 62.

Halftime – Linn-Mar 25, Senior 16. 3-pointers – Linn-Mar 3 (Eells, Karr, Brandt), Senior 2 (Kr. Sommer, Kimble).