

Lions win MVC title

Written by Carl Gonder

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Shane Benton led his team in floor burns and hustle Friday night. And that was saying something.

Benton's top-ranked Linn-Mar Lions used precision passing and a blue collar work ethic to break the game wide open in the second half and easily defeat Washington, 62-41, to clinch a Mississippi Valley Conference division championship at Linn-Mar.

"We just have got to go after everything," Benton said. "I like to go after every loose ball."

Benton scored 11 points and brought a boat load of passion and defensive intensity. At one stage in the third quarter he dove for a ball near the baseline, which brought the entire Linn-Mar bench to its feet.

Benton also had several strong moves inside and was a perfect 6-for-6 from the foul line. He said the team enjoys playing together.

"It is just so much fun. I feel really good about this team. We have a great group of seniors and a lot of good juniors. It is a special group of guys," the 6-foot-3 senior said.

A University of North Dakota recruit, Benton had the assignment of guarding Warrior star Josh Oglesby.

"He kind of reminds me of Reggie Miller," Benton said. "With that high release, he is tough."

Oglesby finished with 21 points, but had to earn every basket. He started off hot, scoring 13 of his team's first 14 points, but had only eight points over the final 16 minutes of play. He hit 8-for-18 shots from the floor and 2-of-3 free throws.

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Linn-Mar led 24-14 at the half and 49-29 after three quarters. The Lions roared past Washington by outscoring the visitors 40-20 in the second and third frames and led by as many as 25 points in the fourth quarter. Only four Washington players hit the scoring column.

Linn-Mar moved to 19-0 (14-0 MVC) while Washington dipped to 11-8 overall. The Warriors have played a brutal schedule and are 2-7 against ranked teams, with several close losses.

Josh Montague had three monster dunks in the first half and a game-high 21 points for the Lions, who were playing without starting center Ian McBrayer (groin injury). Michael Thul started in his place and had a solid performance with a team-high four assists.

"We have a lot of depth which really showed tonight with Ian (McBrayer) out because he is a key part of our team," Montague said.

Montague said passing has been a key for Linn-Mar basketball.

"That is a trademark of this team and most Linn-Mar basketball teams," he said. "We really like to kick the ball and work for that open shot."

Matt Bohannon had a team-high eight rebounds and 15 points (13 in the second half) and said this Linn-Mar team is one of the best in a steady string of strong clubs at the school.

"It is one of the better ones," he said. "I don't want to say this year is any more special than other years, but we have a lot of great guys who are coming together at the end of the season. We are just enjoying it."

"We are at our best when we are passing the ball," he said.

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A dual between two of the state's best point guards, Marcus Paige and Wes Washpun, never really materialized. Paige, averaging 17.4 points, had a quiet nine points. Washpun, averaging 18.1 ppg, had 13 points.

Paige said he and Washpun know each other very well.

"Every time I go against Wes it is a great matchup," he said. "We are both really similar in our athleticism and how we play the game. Our other guys really stepped up big for us tonight. I try not to make it an individual matchup."

Paige said the team will remain intense, despite the fact the conference title is locked up.

"Even though we won the conference tonight, we are going to be focused and take one game at a time," he said.

Linn-Mar beat Washington 80-55 on Jan. 14 in the first meeting of the season. Washington Coach Brad Metzger called Linn-Mar one of the best teams he has ever seen.

"They have more skill in all of the positions. Their guard play is fantastic. I am so impressed with them," he said. "At every position they are as solid as you can be. They are the most balanced team I have seen in a long, long time."

Metzger thinks Linn-Mar compares favorably with the 2010 4A state champion Ames High School team, featuring Mr. Basketball player-of-the-year Harrison Barnes.

"They might be more balanced and better than Ames was last year," he said. "It is hard to see Linn-Mar losing. I am pretty sure their entire starting lineup can dunk the ball."

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WASHINGTON (41): Alex Carr 0 1-2 1, David Tann 0 0-0 0, Brock Butterfield 0 0-0 0, Austin Bergstrom 0 0-0 0, Wesley Washpun 6 0-3 13, Cybryan Moa 0 0-0 0, Josh Oglesby 8 2-3 21, Trent Hoekstra 0 0-0 0, Jason Oney 0 0-0 0, Cory Matteson 0 0-0 0, David Rosenthal 0 0-0 0, Heath Clark 0 0-0 0, Sean Bredl 3 0-0 6, Paul Nash 0 0-0 0, Zach Williams 0 0-0 0, McCauley Todd 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 3-8 41.

LINN-MAR (62): Shane Benton 2 6-6 11, Marcus Paige 4 0-0 9, Matt Bohannon 6 2-3 15, Josh Montague 9 0-0 21, Josh Malone 0 0-0 0, Michael Thul 0 2-2 2, Nick Soyer 0 0-0 0, Matthew Lassen 0 0-0 0, Mason Krusie 0 2-2 2, Nate Johnson 0 0-0 0, Braxton Lancial 0 0-0 0, Nick Gentzler 0 0-0 0, Derik Gogg 1 0-1 2, Jon Kitelinger 0 0-0 0, Andy Henry 0 0-0 0, Alex Holland 0 0-0 0. Totals 22 12-14 62.

Halftime – Linn Mar 24, Washington 14. 3-point goals – Linn-Mar 6 (Montague 3, Bohannon, Benton, Paige), Washington 4 (Oglesby 3, Washpun).