

Cold Lions fall to No. 1 Johnston

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - It's hard to beat a high school basketball team that has six future NCAA Division I or Division II athletes on its roster.

That's what the Linn-Mar Lions faced in the semifinals of the Class 5A girls state basketball tournament Friday and it was too much talent to overcome.

The top-ranked Johnston Dragons, oozing outstanding athletes at every spot, handed the sixth-ranked Lions a 51-39 setback at the Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

"They're a very tough team," said Linn-Mar coach Jaime Brandt. "They're athletic. They have some really talented players and they played really well today."

Taryn Knuth, a 6-foot-4 junior who neutralized Linn-Mar star Amanda Ollinger, has committed to play volleyball at Florida State. Elle Brown, a sensational 5-foot-11 point guard and the daughter of former Olympic track star Nathasha Kaiser-Brown, will play basketball at Missouri.

Haylee Towers will play softball at Western Kentucky. Brooke Wilmes, the daughter of IGHS AU Hall of Famer Dawn Wumkes, will play softball at Missouri. Shayne Stubbs will play soccer at South Dakota State. And Rachel Hinders has signed to play basketball at Lewis University.

"You can tell when you play against them," Ollinger said. "They're very athletic."

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The Lions compounded the problem by not playing a very good game, especially in the first half when they fell behind 27-14 at the intermission. Ollinger, an all-state player who will be joining the Iowa Hawkeyes next season, missed layups that she normally makes with her eyes closed and shot 3-for-15 in the first half alone.

"I don't know," she said, red-eyed after the game. "I kept battling, trying to finish off, but they just wouldn't go in for me the first half. I came out the second half and tried to do whatever I could, but my shots just wouldn't fall. There was nothing I could do about it."



Ollinger finished with 17 points and 16 rebounds, giving her 42 points and 38 rebounds in two games. She established a Class 5A state tournament record with the 38 rebounds, but took little consolation in the achievement.

Ollinger finished 7 for 22 from the floor. The Lions were 15 of 52 from the floor overall for 28.8 percent and 3 for 21 on 3-pointers for 14.3 percent.

"One of those games," Brandt said. "It wasn't our day. Shooting the ball. Finishing. You have those games. Johnston's a great team and they brought it today."

"I'm proud of our girls," she said. "We could have lost that game by 30. They kept believing and

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kept battling in there."

Linn-Mar fell behind by 19 points at 33-14 early in the third quarter. The Lions rallied and drew within 10 points at 40-30 early in the fourth quarter to give themselves a chance, but got no closer the rest of the way.

Knuth, the 6-foot-4 center who will play volleyball at Florida State, finished with 14 points, nine rebounds and three blocked shots. She also got a bouquet of flowers from an admirer in the Johnston student section after the game.

"He just asked me to prom," Knuth explained.

And did she say yes? "Yeah, I guess," she said, laughing. "It would be hard to say no."

Knuth is a few inches taller than Ollinger and quick on her feet, making it hard for Ollinger to dominate around the basket.

"She's a great player, but I've played against a lot of great players before," said Knuth. "It was really nothing new to me. I'm just as big as her and just as quick as her."

Ollinger, also a star volleyball player, saluted Knuth's performance.

"She's long. She moves her feet well," Ollinger said. "She'll do great in volleyball. She's got that volleyball build. I'm excited to see how she does."

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Brown finished with 12 points for Johnston and Hinders added 11.

Johnston (22-3) will face third-ranked Ankeny Centennial (22-3) for the state title Saturday night.

Linn-Mar saw its 10-game winning streak come to an end, leaving the Lions with a 20-5 record.

"It was a phenomenal year," Ollinger said. "Coach told us in the locker room, there's only one team that doesn't feel like this. Right now it hurts a lot."

"I couldn't be more proud of this group," Brandt said. "I told them, we can't let this game define the year we had."

JOHNSTON (51): Brown 4 3-5 12, Towers 1 0-0 3, Stubbs 1 3-4 5, Hinders 4 3-4 11, Knuth 6 1-2 14, Sieren 1 2-2 5, Wilmes 0 0-0 0, Johnson 0 1-2 1.
Totals 17 13-19 51.

LINN-MAR (39): Akers 0 0-0 0, Frese 3 0-0 6, Lancial 1 0-0 3, Finley 3 2-2 9, Ollinger 7 2-2 17, Johnson 0 1-2 1, Murphy 0 0-0 0, Spies 1 1-1 3, Larson 0 0-0 0. Totals 15 6-7 39.

Halftime - Johnston 27, Linn-Mar 14. 3-point goals - Johnston 4 (Brown 1, Towers 1, Knuth 1, Sieren 1), Linn-Mar 3 (Lancial 1, Finley 1, Ollinger 1).