

Prairie girls hold off Marion

Written by Jim Ecker

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Tight defense and excellent free-throw shooting can win a lot of basketball games at any level of the sport

The Cedar Rapids Prairie girls proved it Saturday afternoon.

The Hawks put the clamps on Marion star Chloe Rice and sank 23 of 25 free throws for a 56-49 victory over the Indians at the Prairie gym.

Rice, a 5-foot-10 sophomore who is being recruited by Division I schools, struggled the entire game and did not make a field goal until she banked in a long 3-pointer at the buzzer to finish with five points.

Meanwhile, Prairie marched to the foul line and hit an incredible 92 percent of its free throws to help stave off a furious rally by Marion in the fourth quarter.

Caitlyn Smith of Marion drained four 3-pointers during an incredible two-minute stretch in the fourth quarter as the Indians chopped a 15-point deficit to just three points at 45-42, but the Hawks regrouped and pulled away again.

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Lynsey Altenhofen hit a clutch 3-pointer to give Prairie a 48-42 lead, then Olivia Usher scored the last eight points for the Hawks with a layup and six straight free throws.

It was sweet redemption for Usher, who missed the front end of a one-and-one with two seconds left Friday night in a 51-49 loss at Cedar Falls in a Mississippi Valley Conference game.

"I think last night was really tough on all of us," said Usher, a 5-foot-9 senior who has committed to Kirkwood. "We knew we could have beat Cedar Falls. It was a last-second thing, especially for me. It was hard coming back today.

"But Coach always says, don't let that defeat make it two losses for you. It was important for us to come back ready to play today."

Prairie got off to a strong start and raced to an 18-4 lead in the first quarter, forcing Marion Coach Corby Laube to call two timeouts in the first three minutes of the game. Altenhofer got things started for the Hawks with two 3-pointers from the left corner to set an early tone.

The Hawks displayed a lot of mental toughness, just a few hours after their disappointing loss in Cedar Falls. "I think they wanted to make a statement to their teammates and to the community," Coach Josh Bentley remarked.

The young Marion Indians refused to quit, despite their struggles. The Indians were trailing 43-28 early in the fourth quarter when they played their best stretch of the game.

Isabella Sade got it started with a layup, then Smith nailed two straight 3-pointers to make it 43-36 with 4:46 remaining. Jenna Wagemester made two

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free throws for Prairie, but Smith hit two more triples to make it 45-42 with 3:16 left to go, giving Smith 12 points in a total elapsed time of 2 minutes, 13 seconds.

"We didn't quit. That was nice to see," said Laube. "That was kind of the bright spot of the game, the fight and coming back."

Marion did not quit, but Prairie did not fold.

"Smith hit those shots and we got rattled," said Bentley. "We haven't won a lot in the past and we thought, 'Oh no, here it goes again.' The girls get all the credit. They regrouped and locked in on what we had to do."

Rice, who is considered one of the top sophomores in the state, had a rough game from start to finish, with a string of turnovers that led to a pair of extended trips to the bench. Prairie's defense had a lot to do with that.

"She's a tough kid," said Laube. "She'll bounce back."

Usher had the primary defensive assignment against Rice. Wagemester also got the call at times and the Hawks also employed a sticky trap zone defense that caused problems.

"Our focus was definitely on her and (Mia) Laube," said Usher. "We just wanted to make sure we had help defense. My teammates helped a lot. I got beat a couple of times and they were there. It was team defense."

Bentley applauded his team's defense against Rice.

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"They locked her down," he remarked. "We knew if we could take her away and make other people make plays, we'd have a good chance."

Usher led Prairie (2-2) with 12 points. Makenzie Stoffer went 8-for-8 at the foul line and scored 10 points for the Hawks. Altenhofen finished with three 3-pointers and nine points.

Smith topped Marion (2-1) with 14 points. Laube finished with 10 points.

The Indians started one freshman, three sophomores and one junior Saturday, with two more freshmen and another sophomore coming off the bench, but Coach Laube said youth is no excuse.

"We have to get a little more physical, maybe," he said. "Mentally they should be there, but sometimes physically they have to take that next step as far as being able to handle a bump or being able to finish things."

MARION (49): Knapp 0 4-5 4, Rice 1 2-2 5, Smith 5 0-0 14, Wright 0 0-0 0, Dunne 0 0-0 0, Laube 3 3-3 10, Willette 0 0-0 0, Herold 2 1-2 7, Sade 3 1-2 7, Jordan 0 2-2 2. Totals 14 13-16 49.

PRAIRIE (56): Moenk 1 1-1 3, Altenhofen 3 0-0 9, Lampe 0 2-2 2, Schmitt 2 1-2 7, Adams 0 0-0 0, Usher 3 6-7 12, Wagemester 2 2-2 6, Shreeves 0 0-0 0, Kuch 1 1-1 3, Stoffer 1 8-8 10, Person 1 2-2 4. Totals 14 23-25 56.

Halftime - Prairie 26, Marion 18. 3-point goals - Marion 8 (Smith 4, Herold 2, Rice 1, Laube 1), Prairie 5 (Altenhofen 3, Schmitt 2).