

Young Indians stun Harlan at state

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - It's not true that the Marion Indians have a bunch of sixth graders on the girls varsity basketball team who need a baby-sitter when their parents go to the movies.

The Indians are young, but they're not quite that young. And best of all, they have absolutely no fear.

Marion stunned Harlan, 46-38, in the opening round of the Class 4A girls state basketball tournament Wednesday in one of the biggest upsets in recent history.

Harlan, the two-time defending state champions, had four seniors in the starting lineup who helped them compile a phenomenal 95-6 record the last four years with four straight trips to state.

Marion, meanwhile, countered with three sophomores and two freshmen in its lineup and none of them had ever been on a stage this big in their lives.

"Any team can beat anybody in a tournament, so that's what we came out here to do," said Chloe Rice, one of the sophomores. "We knew we had nothing to lose, so we came out with a lot of energy.

"We wanted to prove people wrong and show what we can do."

Mission accomplished.

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Marion (20-4) will face Pella (22-2) in the semiifnals Friday at 11:45 a.m. at Wells Fargo Arena.

Maddie Knapp, a 5-foot-3 freshman, popped off the bench in the first half and popped in three 3-pointers as the Indians stomped all over the Cyclones on their way to a stunning 20-6 lead at halftime.

Harlan scored only two points in the first quarter, both on free throws, and the Cyclones did not make their first field goal until there was 5:52 left in the second quarter after Marion had taken a 15-2 lead.



The Indians built the advantage to 18 points in the third quarter and showed a ton of poise in the final minutes after Harlan had pulled within four points.

"We told our guys when we came in here that we were going to come here and try to win it," said Marion Coach Corby Laube. "Harlan is obviously a great team and we knew that it was going to be tough, but we felt we belonged here.

"We got up big and we knew that Harlan wasn't going to go away. The fast start was important, but to be able to hold them off on this stage with young kids showed a lot of toughness from the girls."

Things got dicey when Harlan (20-3) pulled within 33-29 on a 3-pointer with a little more than four minutes left in the game, but the young Indians refused to crumble.

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Marion broke Harlan's press and freshman Sophie Willette made a baseline drive to make it 35-29. Harlan got back within four points again at 38-34 with another 3-pointer, but Rice countered with two foul shots to make it 40-34.

Harlan scored again to make it 40-36, but Willette struck again with another baseline drive from the same spot to make it 42-36 and the Indians took off again from there.

There was no fear.

"When Coach sees that we have an open lane or sees that we're open, he says don't be afraid to drive, don't be afraid to go for it," said Willette, who led the Indians with 12 points. "I knew it was a tight game at the end, but I knew if I made them it would put us up more and help us more.

"I was so focused on winning that I didn't really feel any fear of making the two baskets."

Marion got a steal and Rice hit one free throw for a 53-46 lead. Rice missed her second foul shot, but Mia Laube grabbed the offensive rebound and the Indians kept possession.

Rice cashed two foul shots for a 45-36 margin with 39 seconds remaining and the Indians could taste victory. Harlan missed a shot and Laube made one free throw to make it 46-36 with 23 seconds left to ice it.

A few seconds later, the Indians were celebrating a big, big victory in the program's first trip to the state tournament since 2010, back when most of these girls were in grade school.

"We treated it as a regular game," said Laube, a sophomore and the coach's daughter. "This whole season, we haven't really looked at our age. We think our basketball experience (on the AAU circuit) makes us an older team."

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Many of the Indians have played together for years and are good friends.

"We're always doing things together," said Laube. "Our coaches help create that environment. They have so much energy and we have so much fun together. I think that brings us together on and off the court."

Marion does not have a tall team, but the Indians have lanky players who used their long arms and quick feet to give Harlan all sorts of trouble with a 1-3-1 zone defense. Harlan stars Jordyn Moser and Taylor Frederick were held to 13 points apiece and combined to shoot only 9 for 28 from the field.

Harlan finished second in the 2013 state tournament with a young team, falling by one point in the finals to Xavier. The Cyclones won state titles in 2014 and 2015 before losing in the quarterfinals this year.

"Our goal is to do what Harlan does," said Corby Laube. "They're a great model, they're a great basketball program. That's where we want to get to."

Harlan Coach Zach Klaassen thinks they might.

"They have a lot of nice young players," he said. "They're going to be good for years to come."

Marion used three freshmen, four sophomores, one junior and one senior in the ballgame. Their next assignment comes Friday in the state semifinals.

MARION (46): Rice 1 8-10 10, Smith 1 0-0 3, Wright 0 3-4 3, Laube 1 1-2 4, Willette 5 0-0 12, Knapp 3 0-1 9, Herold 1 0-0 3, Sade 1 0-0 2, Jordan 0 0-0 0. Totals 13 12-17 46.

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HARLAN (38): Bruce 1 0-1 2, Klein 0 2-2 2, Moser 4 3-4 13, Frederick 5 2-7 13, Ahrenholtz 2 0-0 5, Juhl 0 0-0 0, Hansen 1 0-0 3, Hoffmann 0 0-0 0. Totals 13 7-14 38.

Halftime - Marion 20, Harlan 6. 3-point goals - Marion 8 (Knapp 3, Willette 2, Smith 1, Laube 1, Herold 1), Harlan 5 (Moser 2, Frederick 1, Ahrenholtz 1, Hansen 1)