

Prairie boys hustle past Lions

Written by Tom Fruehling

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It's as true in sports as it is in combat, that when the going gets tough the tough get going.

The Linn-Mar and Prairie boys were locked in a knock-down-drag-out battle for three quarters Friday night on the Hawks home court.

And with the win on the line, Prairie turned up the heat and the Lions melted.

"It's very disappointing," said Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson after the 46-33 defeat. "They were clearly the tougher team. They were much more aggressive.

"We just didn't play with a lot of fire. When they got some momentum, we sort of backed down and played on our heels.

"We just wilted."

While Robertson watched glumly as the Hawks (3-5, 2-2 MVC) turned a one-point lead at the end of the third period into a 10-point bulge within two minutes, Prairie Coach James Moses was like an overgrown jockey whipping his towel.

"Don't let up," he exhorted his stallions in short pants as they ran circles around the Lions. "Don't let up. Run, run, run."

Streaky junior guard Kentrel Smith, especially, heard the message loud and clear. While he was a pest on defense all night, stealing passes left and right, he didn't score a point in the first half.

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But Smith scored eight of his game-high 15 in the first five minutes of the fourth quarter. All of them came on strong drives down the lane into the heart of the Lions big front line.

“Coach told me to attack the basket,” said the rock-solid Smith.

Moses said the plan was to push the ball upcourt at every opportunity, and to play tenacious defense right from the beginning.

“Our defense creates offense,” spoke Moses. “We wanted to disrupt their rhythm and take away the momentum. We wanted to make it tough for them to get their shots off.

“And if we got steals, we wanted to run. We scored points off of our defense.”

The Lions, on the other hand, didn’t have much firepower to speak of after the first four minutes of the game. They went on a 9-0 run to take a 9-3 lead but sputtered the rest of the way. Linn-Mar (2-5, 1-3) managed just two points in the second quarter, allowing Prairie to knot the score at 15 at halftime.

The drought persisted in the third quarter, as the Hawks’ steely defense let them jump ahead to a quick seven-point lead.

Silky smooth Lion Jimmy Roth closed the spigot with three rapid-fire jumpers to end the period.

Then Smith took over the show.

“We really did nothing good in three-and-a-half quarters,” said Robertson. “No excuses. I just couldn’t get them to play hard.”

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And while the veteran coach tried all sorts of lineup switches, only three players ended up scoring. Roth had 12 points, Matt Lassen 11 and Derik Gogg 10.

Savvy floor general Jace Hanna was also in double figures for the Hawks with 10, including 3-pointers at the opening bell of the match and just before the buzzer at halftime.

Cool as a cucumber throughout, Hanna said he was determined not to take the foot off the peddle once his team started pouring it on in the fourth quarter.

They kept playing to win instead of playing not to lose.

“Coach told us,” Hanna said, “to play hard right to the very last second.”

LINN-MAR (33): Matt Lassen 4 1-1 11, Jordan Bohannon 0 0-0 0, Jon Schlotterback 0 0-0 0, Jimmy Roth 6 0-0 12, Derik Gogg 4 2-4 10, Nic Uhler 0 0-0 0, Zach Martins 0 0-0 0, Nate Dick 0 0-0 0, Lane Halupnik 0 0-0 0, Matt Meier 0 0-0 0, Caleb Nelson 0 0-0 0, Ryan Schmidt 0 0-0 0. Totals 14 3-5 33.

PRAIRIE (46): Jace Hanna 2 4-5 10, Kentrl Smith 6 3-3 15, Tyler Butz 1 0-0 2, Bryce Meeker 2 0-0 4, JoJo Simpson 1 0-0 2, Michael Mims 0 0-0 0, Ty Mouglin 0 0-0 0, Dylan Kuchermann 1 0-0 2, DeMetrius Harper 2 1-2 5, Andrew Bechtel 0 0-0 0, Tom Eilers 1 3-4 6. Totals 16 11-14 46.

Halftime – Linn-Mar 15, Prairie 15. 3-point goals – Linn-Mar 2 (Lassen 2), Prairie 3 (Hanna 2, Eilers). Total fouls – Linn-Mar 15, Prairie 11. Fouled out – None.