

Improved Hawks fall at City High

Written by Pat Harty

Friday, 26 February 2016 23:03 - Last Updated Friday, 26 February 2016 23:55



IOWA CITY – A team's record doesn't always tell the whole story.

That's how Prairie boys basketball coach Jeremy Rickertsen will look back on his 2015-16 squad, which had its season end Friday with a 66-55 loss to Iowa City High in a Class 4A substate semifinal at City High.

The Hawks finished the season with an 8-15 record, but Rickertsen is pleased with the direction of the program.

"I just told the seniors, 'You leave a place better than when you got here,'" Rickertsen said. "And regardless of the record, they've done that.

"They've set a good tone for how to practice for the young kids and how to work hard and compete and not give up."

Prairie never led in Friday's game, but it also refused to wilt.

City bolted to a 7-0 lead, but the Hawks answered with five consecutive points. City led 31-20 at halftime, but Prairie started the second half with a 7-2 scoring run, trimming the deficit to 33-27.

City led 49-36 after three quarters, but Cal Clark made consecutive 3-point baskets in the fourth quarter, trimming the lead to 61-53 with 2 minutes, 36 second left to play.

City struggled at the free throw line down the stretch, making just 5-of-12 attempts in the final

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2:12 of the game. But that still was enough to secure the victory and a grudge-match showdown with crosstown rival West High on Tuesday at the U.S. Cellular Center in the substate finals.

City and West split two games during the regular season.

The Little Hawks had a first-round bye in the playoffs and entered Friday's game after an extended layoff.

"We hadn't played in over a week and we were a little concerned coming in because we hadn't played for awhile," City coach Don Showalter said. "This time of year, seven or eight practices before you play a game really is not what you want to do.

"But I thought our kids came out ready to play right away. If we had made some free throws down the stretch, it wouldn't have been quite as close as it was."

It wasn't necessarily a surprise that Prairie struggled to defend against City High's bigger front line. The surprise was who did most of the damage for the Little Hawks.

Instead of it being 6-foot-9 center Micah Martin, it was 6-2 forward Jason Jones who shredded Prairie's defense. Jones led City with 21 points on 9-of-14 shooting from the field. Most of his baskets came on short bank shots.

"We considered him a little more of role player," Rickertsen said. "But he stepped up big-time for them."

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Jones stepped up on a night in which Martin and starting point guard Naeem Smith both were in foul trouble in the second half. Jones scored 11 points in the third quarter with Martin and Smith both on the bench for long stretches.

“Their size was a big difference,” Rickertsen said. “And, obviously, we knew that coming in. Our guys competed. For the most part, they followed the scouting (report).

“City High just made plays. Credit to them. When we did get them in foul trouble and Martin had to go out and Smith had to go out, Jones stepped up for them.”

The game was emotional throughout with the losing team knowing that its season would be over. Martin was called for a technical foul early in the third quarter, which led to four free throws by Prairie’s Max Smith-Drahos.

Rickertsen also was whistled for a technical foul with 2:12 left in the fourth quarter after he felt the officials had missed a traveling call on Jones.

“It’s been a long time since a Prairie team had been to a substate final and the kids knew that,” Rickertsen said. “So there was a lot on the line. And when you work as hard as you do all year long, it’s going to get emotional when it’s win or go home.”

Smith-Drahos led Prairie with 21 points. He only scored four points in the first half, all of which came on free throws.

Smith-Drahos decided at halftime that he had to be more aggressive in the second half. He repeatedly drove to the basket in the third and fourth

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quarters, drawing several fouls. Smith-Drahos made 13-of-17 free throw attempts overall.

“I think it was a decision by myself,” Smith-Drahos said. “I knew if we were going to have a chance that I was going to have to score more than four points in the second half. So I just took it upon myself.”

Only a junior, Smith-Drahos likes the direction the Prairie program is headed under Rickertsen.

“It’s, obviously, tough to lose emotional, close games like that,” Smith-Drahos said. “But I like the way we were hustling and playing hard and for each other. And that’s a step in the right direction for this program.”

PRAIRIE (55): Max Smith-Drahos 4-10 13-17 21, Cal Clark 4-12 0-0 13, Jake Eilers 1-6 0-0 2, Jalen Rima 2-7 3-5 8, Logan Serbousek 0-10-0 0, Mason Hook 0-2 1-2 1, Ryan Oxley 3-6 0-0 7, Darren Kilpatrick 1-5 0-0 3, Griff Clark 0-1 0-0 0, Levi Usher 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 16-50 17-24 55.

CITY HIGH (66): Naeem Smith 4-7 4-7 12, Henry Mulligan 2-7 0-0 5, Nile Ringen 2-5 4-8 10, Jason Jones 9-14 3-5 21, Micah Martin 3-5 2-5 8, Gabriel Nkumu 0-0 0-0 0, Vance Dillon 2-2 1-2 6, Charles Johnson 2-8 0-0 4, Conrad Donnelly 0-0 0-0 0. Totals 24-49 14-27 66.

Halftime - Iowa City High 31, Prairie 20. 3-point goals – Prairie 6 (Cal Clark 3, Rima, Oxley, Kilpatrick) City 4 (Ringen 2, Mulligan, Dillon).

Fouls – Prairie 22, City 14. Fouled out – Rima. Technical fouls – Martin, Prairie bench.