

Warriors sting No. 2 Linn-Mar, share MVC title

Written by Jim Ecker

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Frank Howell entered the Washington locker room Thursday night and got an ear-piercing ovation from his players.

A few minutes later, seniors Tia Dawson, Alissa Oney and Ashley Piper popped out of the visitors locker room with big, happy smiles and plenty of emotion.

The sixth-ranked Warriors upset No.2 Linn-Mar in overtime, 53-46, to grab a share of the Mississippi Valley Conference title and hand the Lions a rare loss on their home court on Senior Night.

"Just amazing," said Oney, whose long 3-pointer gave Washington the lead for good in overtime. "We feel so happy about this. We found out they hadn't been beaten here in three years, so it's obviously a great accomplishment for us."

Washington tied Linn-Mar for the Mississippi Division title in the MVC with 14-2 records in the final game of the regular season. Waterloo West (13-2) can grab a piece of the Mississippi crown as well with a victory over Cedar Falls Friday night, so there's likely to be a three-way tie.

The Warriors were aiming for a piece of the crown and they got it with a strong effort.

"It feels really good," said Dawson, who excelled on defense against Kiah Stokes despite playing the fourth period and overtime with four fouls. "Yeah, really happy."

Stokes made the prestigious McDonald's All-American team that was announced Thursday and played like an All-American with 25 points, 22 rebounds and 13 blocked shots. But none of her teammates scored more than six points, and the Warriors ended up winning the game with better overall depth.

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Dawson finished with 13 points, 16 rebounds and nine blocked shots, not quite Stokes-like but close enough. She stood her ground against Stokes at crucial moments and did her job, despite living on the edge of danger with those four fouls.

"I knew that I had to play straight-up and I couldn't really jump and try to block her shot," she said.

"She played well," offered Stokes. "She bothered my shot a lot, which is one of the main reasons I missed so many layups. I think that was a big factor in us losing."

Dawson got help from Piper and other Warriors against the 6-foot-3 Stokes, but it was Dawson who looked Stokes in the eye and didn't blink in the biggest game of the year.

"That was great, because it's so easy to back away when you have four fouls," said Howell. "But you have to keep playing hard if you're playing against Kiah Stokes."

"That was really big," he said. "She was able to stay aggressive and not commit any stupid fouls down the stretch."

Washington trailed 41-39 in the final minute of regulation, but Piper boldly drove right at Stokes and hit a layup to tie the game 41-41 with 23 seconds left. Jenna Eells tried to win it for Linn-Mar in the final seconds, but Dawson swatted her shot away.

The Lions led 43-41 in overtime when Oney fired from several feet behind the 3-point line and hit nothing but net. The Warriors took a 44-43 edge on that basket and never looked back.

"That was pretty big. I can't remember the last time I made a shot that big," said Oney. "I knew I had to take it. We were down one point, and I got the open look. I had my hands and feet ready and I just let it go. I knew it was in."

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Linn-Mar committed a turnover and Piper hit a free throw. Stokes missed a shot and Oney made a free throw. Stokes missed again and Oney hit two free throws. Mykaela Brandt and Eells missed shots for Linn-Mar and Jazz Royster made two free throws to give Washington a 50-43 bulge with 36.8 seconds left to clinch the victory.

Linn-Mar topped Washington, 44-41, in their first meeting at Washington last month, and the Warriors evened the scales by topping the Lions at Linn-Mar in a similar contest.

"I think we played a lot smarter this time, we had better composure and we didn't make as many stupid turnovers," said Oney.

Oney led Washington (17-3) with 15 points. Dawson's 13 points included her only 3-pointer of the season. Piper finished with 10 points and Royster scored nine.

Stokes scored 25 of 46 points for Linn-Mar (19-2), which means she outscored all of her teammates combined.

Washington and Linn-Mar have been placed in different postseason regionals by the IGHS AU, giving both teams an excellent chance of reaching the state tournament. A rubber match could come in Des Moines.

"I told the girls, there's no two teams in the state that had a better preparation, with this kind of atmosphere, with the media and what was on the line," said Linn-Mar Coach Mike Brandt.

"For everybody's sake it will make us better. Hopefully it will make us hungry and get us ready for that postseason. And hopefully we'll meet up with them again."

WASHINGTON (53): Piper 4 1-3 10, Oney 4 4-5 15, Pilcher 1 0-0 2, Royster 1 6-7 9, Dawson 4

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4-4 13, Pritchett 1 1-2 3, Kramer 0 1-4 1, Herb 0 0-0 0, Beard 0 0-0 0, Roundtree 0 0-0 0. Totals 15 17-25 53.

LINN-MAR (46): Brandt 1 2-2 4, Thrune 2 1-2 5, Karr 0 0-0 0, Eells 2 0-0 6, Stokes 8 9-9 25, Cheatham 1 1-2 3, Major 0 3-4 3. Totals 14 16-19 46.

Halftime -- Linn-Mar 20, Washington 14. Regulation -- Washington 41, Linn-Mar 41. 3-point shots -- Washington 6 (Oney 3, Piper, Royster, Dawson), Linn-Mar 2 (Eells 2).