

Cougars fall to Tigers in final second

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 24 February 2015 23:06 -



The Cedar Falls Tigers worked on a "junk" zone defense for two days in preparation for the Class 5A regional finals against Kennedy, but Cedar Falls Coach Gregg Groen did not want to use it until the time was right.

His timing was impeccable Tuesday night.

The Tigers handcuffed Kennedy stars Stephanie Botkin and Lela Sellers in the fourth quarter with their "junk" defense and upended the Cougars, 51-49, on a layup by Ally Conrad with nine-tenths of a second left in the game at Kennedy.

Cedar Falls (18-5) will make its first trip to the state tournament in seven years next week and face Waukee (21-2) in the opening round on Wednesday.

Kennedy retired with a 16-7 record after seeing a six-point lead evaporate in the fourth quarter.

Botkin, a 6-foot senior who will play college basketball at Washington University, and Sellers, a 6-foot junior who is being recruited by

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Division I schools, barely touched the ball in the fourth quarter as Cedar Falls dared the other Cougars to beat them.

Kennedy almost did, getting clutch 3-pointers from Sydney Hayden and Linden Runels to tie the game at 46-46 and 49-49, but the Tigers made a remarkable play in the final seconds to snatch the victory.

Sellers finished with 16 points, but did not score in the fourth period. Botkin finished with nine points, but had only point in the final stanza against that "junk" zone by Cedar Falls.

Groen originally planned to use his "junk" defense from the outset Tuesday after losing to Kennedy by 11 points earlier in the season on Kennedy's home court, but he waited until he needed it the most.

"Finally in the fourth quarter when we were down by six we needed to get something else going, so we came out with it," he remarked. "I think it threw their tempo off a little bit, just enough to allow us to get back in the game."

The Tigers had a 49-46 lead heading into the final minute, but Runels drilled a 3-pointer with 51 seconds left for Kennedy to tie the game 49-49 with her only points of the night.

Cedar Falls killed about 19 seconds, then called a timeout with 32.2 seconds left when one of its players got into trouble against Kennedy's defensive pressure. Groen set up a final play in the huddle, but the Tigers had to adjust on the fly.

Incredibly, Cedar Falls made eight passes in 30 seconds as Kennedy tried to force a turnover. Conrad finally got the ball in the left corner with just a few seconds remaining and took off for the basket. The

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Cougars were a little late in their defensive rotation and Conrad banked in a layup to give Cedar Falls a 51-49 lead.

The clock showed all zeroes on the scoreboard, but Kennedy had called a timeout after Conrad's basket and the officials put nine-tenths of a second on the clock. It didn't matter, because Ashley Hamilton's long pass for Hayden was batted away by Emma Gerdes and the game ended.

Groen was proud of the way his team handled its final possession.



"Really it's about having guards that can handle the ball in pressure situations," he said. "When there's 40 seconds left (actually 32) and you're playing a team like Kennedy and good pressure defense, that's a lot of time to control that basketball and not turn it over and set it up for a last-second play."

Cedar Falls outscored Kennedy 15-7 in the final quarter. The Cougars scored only one point in the first 6 1/2 minutes of the stanza on a free throw by Botkin. They made only two baskets in the period on the 3-pointers by Hayden and Runels.

Kennedy Coach Tony Vis wanted Botkin and Sellers, his two leading scorers, to get as many shots as possible with the game on the line, but Cedar

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Falls would not let it happen and the Cougars could not make it happen.

"In that moment you have to go to your other kids and they've got to make shots," said Vis. "And Sydney and Linden did."

Botkin and Sellers had little room to breathe in the fourth quarter. "We struggled a little more on offense against that zone," said Botkin.

"They went into a zone to stop the drives and to really force us to shoot outside," Sellers added.

It was a frantic finish in a tense game that could have gone either way. Vis spent 15 minutes with his team in the locker room, telling them it was a great contest and trying to console his club.

"I said, 'Yeah, it hurts and I'm disappointed,' but at the same time that was an epic high school girls basketball game in that environment. There's so much pressure and you want it so bad and everything is on the line and you have two really good teams that made plays. It came down to who had the ball last."

Botkin finished her career as a member of the 1,000 point/500 rebound club as a four-year member of the varsity.

"Obviously I'm disappointed," she said after the tough loss. "I would have loved to finish my year in Des Moines at the state tournament. But at the same time I've had a great experience on this team. There girls are amazing. Great teammates. So much fun."

"We played a great game," said Botkin. "It was a dogfight back and forth, back and forth. Lost on pretty much a buzzer-beater."

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Gerdes led Cedar Falls with 14 points. Hayden made three 3-pointers and had 11 points for Kennedy.

Kennedy senior Abby Helweg, who averages 4.3 points, did not play due to a concussion.

CEDAR FALLS (51): Becker 4 2-3 10, Gerdes 5 3-3 14, Long 2 0-0 5, Kramer 0 0-0 0, Conrad 3 0-0 7, Barney 3 0-0 8, Boettger 2 3-5 7. Totals 19 8-11 51.

KENNEDY (49): Dye 0 0-0 0, Hamilton 1 0-0 2, Hayden 4 0-0 11, Sellers 6 3-3 16, Milbrath 0 0-0 0, Runels 1 0-0 3, Dolphin 3 2-2 8, Botkin 4 1-2 9.
Totals 19 6-7 49.

Halftime - Cedar Falls 23, Kennedy 22. 3-point goals - Cedar Falls 5 (Barney 2, Gerdes 1, Long 1, Conrad 1), Kennedy 5 (Hayden 3, Sellers 1, Runels 1).