

By Pat Magers

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COLUMBUS – It's hard to imagine a 27-1 ballclub coming into a state tournament game with a chip on its collective shoulder, a team with something to prove.

But that was Norwalk for its Division II state semifinal against Dayton Thurgood Marshall. Or so said coach Steve Gray.

Whatever the motivation, the Truckers did the job with a 72-64 win in the school's first-ever state basketball appearance at Value City Arena Thursday in front of 9,226 potential believers.

Norwalk faces Columbus Bishop Watterson in the championship game here Saturday at 10:30 a.m. Watterson topped Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary 56-51 in Thursday's second game.

"Everybody said we were the only team that didn't belong here this weekend," Gray said after his club sent the Cougars to the sideline at 23-6. "When you have St. V's, Watterson and Thurgood Marshall, Norwalk's small city. We were the odd man out.

"Thurgood Marshall's a great team, but we really did expect to win," he said in postgame with standouts Jeff Thomas and Ben Haraway at his side. "We've played the best of the best the past two years whether it was summer or scrimmages. And these two have played big-time AAU and once again, you win with players."

As usual, the two showed up big for the Northern Ohio League co-champion Truckers. Thomas, a Georgia State recruit, tossed in 20 points and grabbed nine rebounds while Malone-bound Haraway added 20 points, eight assists and two steals.

Along with Grant Hull, who rediscovered his shooting eye while scoring 17, they accounted for all but 15 of the Trucker total.

"They are a resilient bunch," Thurgood Marshall coach Darnell Hoskins said. "They made shots and got stops on defense when they really needed them."

Thomas put down 12 in the third quarter to spark Norwalk.

Darnell Hoskins Jr. scored six quick points, Rachaun Martin added a layup in transition and Tremayne Hawkins hit a couple

short jumpers as the Cougars twice opened five-point leads in the first three minutes of the second half.

It was 43-39 when Thomas turned things around. First, he hit a jumper in the lane and then he knocked down a 3-pointer that gave the Truckers the lead at 44-43 with 3:15 to go in the quarter.

Norwalk led 52-47 at the break after Hull turned a steal into a layup, Haraway hit a foul shot and Thomas scored five more, including another 3-pointer.

Martin, who led Thurgood Marshall with 14 points and four assists, hit a couple jumpers early in the fourth period and the Cougars had one last lead at 57-56 when Dwayne Chastain hit a long 3-pointer from the right corner.

But Thomas nailed his third trey in four tries and Haraway drove for a three-point play to put Norwalk on top for good.

“The guy (defender Derrick Daniels) started to back up and I was thinking ‘shoot it’ and then I was thinking that’s not a very good shot,” Thomas said of the go-ahead goal. “He backed up some more and it was like, why not.”

Hull was perfect in six tries from the line and Haraway added a couple foul shots in the final minute to seal it.

“You have to give Norwalk a ton of credit,” said Hoskins, who was an easy Norwalk convert if he had been a non-believer. “I thought the entire game, they were the aggressor. Quite frankly, the better team won. The better team that deserved to win, won.

“Going in we thought we could do some things to disrupt them on offense,” he said. “But when we gave them a punch or two, they responded. That’s what great teams do.”

Daniels had 13 points and 14 rebounds for the Cougars but was limited to a single foul shot in the second half. Hoskins Jr. added 12 points.

TWICE AS NICE FOR WATTERSON – Thursday’s win was Watterson’s second straight over St. Vincent-St. Mary in state tournament play. The Eagles won 55-52 in last year’s title game.

“We executed the things we wanted to do on the floor extremely well,” Watterson coach Vince Lombardo said. “They’re

a great basketball team and to have the opportunity to beat them twice the last couple of years is very special.”

It didn't look that way to start as four different Irish scored in a 9-2 SVSM burst a little more than three minutes into the game.

But the Eagles went on a 23-6 run, much of it on the shooting of Joey DiOrio, and led 30-21 at the half. DiOrio scored all 10 of his points, including a couple 3-pointers, in the first half.

“As I heard Coach (Lombardo) say, great teams play a step up and DiOrio stepped up in a big way,” Irish coach Dru Joyce said. “We did not expect that. We thought he could shoot some 3s but we were hoping he would not be as successful as he was.

“They were able to get us in a little bit of foul trouble in the first half and we seemed to be back on our heels,” he said.

Watterson (26-2) used multiple zone looks, at times switching each possession, and pushed the lead to as many 14 at 40-26 with 2:35 left in third period before the Irish rallied.

Jalen Hudson (18 points, five rebounds, four blocks) and Josh Williams (12 points) led the charge as SVSM twice tied it, the last time at 44-44 with 5:20 to play.

“We knew they had a run coming; we were hoping it wasn't quite as good of a run as it turned out to be,” Lombardo said.

Matt Lehman, who led the Eagles with 19 points, posted for two, Andy Grieser hit two foul shots and then Lehman added a tip-in to regain the lead for good.

Matt Hughes had 11 points while Grieser and Cody Calhoun were netting eight each for the winners. VJ King had eight points and eight boards for the Irish (19-10).

DYNAMIC DUO WELL PREPPED– Norwalk's Gray was asked about how his club withstood repeated challenges from Thurgood Marshall. For him, the answer was simple.

“Uh, Ben Haraway and Jeff Thomas,” Gray said of his two four-year letters.

“Ben is going to become the third player in the history of the NOL with 1,000 points and 500 assists,” he said. “The other two

are a guy by the name of Diebler (Jake), who coaches at Ohio State, and Nick Dials. So he's in pretty select company.

"And Jeff, Jeff does things I can't teach," he said. "He's just a very blessed athlete who has worked extremely hard."

How hard?

"Before every game except today, Ben and Jeff go through about a 40-minute shooting workout," Gray said. "Jeff's dad runs it and it's something to watch. A couple of kids on the team have said, 'I'm glad that's not my dad.'"

GIVE 'EM HULL – Thursday's game was a breakout for Hull, who averaged 10.2 points per game but had been in a slump.

The senior guard managed just three points against Clyde and seven against Perkins in the district tournament and was limited to four by Vermilion and seven by Bath in the regional.

"Grant is the best shooter in the NOL but he's really been struggling the last month," Gray said. "We had a little heart-to-heart talk at the Lima Bath game and basically, it went something like this: 'You turn down a shot, I'm taking you out. I don't care how many you miss, you're going to shoot it.'

"(Today) he was big time with 17 points and defensively, he had a couple big steals for us."

OFFICIAL NOTICE – Former Fostoria High School standout Jamie Clay was one of the officials for the Watterson-SVSM contest.

Clay, who earned multiple letters in three sports for the Redmen before his graduation in 1988, now resides in Rossford. This was his third state tournament assignment.