

By Pat Magers

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COLUMBUS – The last time Cleveland East Tech played in the boys basketball state tournament, Richard Nixon was president and the event was played at St. John Arena.

The last time Upper Arlington reached the big time, Nixon's father could have been president and St. John Arena wouldn't be built for another 19 years.

So it was a long-awaited opportunity for the two Division I programs. It went well for Upper Arlington, which throttled Trotwood Madison 74-59 at Value City Arena Friday night.

For East Tech, not so much. Lakewood St. Edward bounced the Scarabs 89-64.

Upper Arlington and St. Ed will tangle here tonight at 8:30 p.m. for the state championship.

"Wow, what an awesome feeling," Upper Arlington coach Tim Casey said after his club improved to 27-1. The Golden Bears have won 26 straight since falling to Powell Olentangy Liberty 34-31 in the second game of the season.

Upper Arlington last made the state tournament in 1937, when the event was played at the Columbus Fairgrounds. The tournament was spread over a number of sites across the state in those days. It wasn't until St. John Arena was built in 1956 that the tournament had a permanent site.

"This is a great accomplishment for these kids," he said. "We had great preparation all week long and the guys executed the game plan. We showed poise and patience but we stayed aggressive to score, which is the key against an athletic team like we faced."

Madison (25-3) had the upper hand early as All-Ohioan Dazhonetae Bennett scored eight points in the first four minutes to spark a 12-6 start. But the Rams went the next six minutes without a score as Upper Arlington went on an 18-0 run to take control.

The Golden Bears did it with some snappy passing and an ability to take their game inside.

Upper Arlington hit 14-of-23 from the field in building a 36-22 halftime lead and then topped that efficiency by hitting 11-of-16 in the second

half.

“I think Upper Arlington’s really good and at the end of the day, they executed when they needed to execute,” Ram coach Rocky Rockhold said. “We didn’t communicate very well on defense.

“We left passing lanes open, which we didn’t want to do, and we left back doors open because weren’t playing to our defensive principles,” he said. “Credit to them for shooting so well, but I think they had an awful lot of good looks because we didn’t communicate.”

There may have been no better example of such than a seven-second span to close the third period and start the fourth.

Danny Hummer went backdoor on a sideline inbounds pass and turned it into a three-point play for a 55-35 lead. Then Kevin Vannatta went backdoor off a midcourt entry pass to start the fourth.

Though the Golden Bears were having their way, they couldn’t completely relax. This was a Trotwood Madison that rallied from 16 down to Cincinnati Moeller and won the regional championship on Chris Mack’s 3-pointer at the buzzer.

All-Ohioan Vannatta topped the Golden Bears with 25 points. Logan Richter added 14 points while Hummer contributed 10 points, seven rebounds, 10 assists and three steals.

Mack was scoreless in this one, but the Rams did get 23 from Bennett and 10 from Jermichael Blanton.

ST. ED HAS IT ALL, DOES IT ALL – Nobody has to tell St. Edward coach Eric Flannery how talented his team is. The pieces are there for the school’s second boys basketball state championship.

That is especially true now that 6-foot-9 sophomore standout Derek Funderburk has returned to action after recovering from a broken foot,

And the Eagles are on a roll. They were dominant in the first half and even better in the second half while improving to 25-2. In the process, they spoiled East Tech’s first visit to the state tournament since 1972, well before the Schottenstein Center was built.

“Well No. 1, we shot the ball extremely well looking at the stats,” Flannery said. “As a coach, it feels like we’re shooting 40 percent but I

see it was over 70 percent, which obviously is very good.

“We also took care of the ball reasonably well,” he said. “They are very quick and do a tremendous job of getting their hands on the ball and getting into the passing lanes. We were fortunate enough to be able to deal with that.

“Again, I realize I’ve got some guys who can play and talent is probably the reason we won today.”

St. Edward opened a 43-23 lead by halftime while hitting two-thirds of their field goal attempts. The Eagles then came out and made 17-of-22 in the second half, a sizzling 77 percent.

Many were layups, two were putbacks and six were dunks. But they also had 24 assists in the package.

Two blue chippers in the Eagle bunch are junior Kipper Nichols and Funderburk.

The 6-foot-7 Nichols scored 25 on 9-of-12 shooting with five rebounds and five assists. Funderburk added 12 points and four rebounds in 12 minutes. It was his third game and first with a full week of practice since returning to the squad.

“This leaves a bitter taste, but we lost to a great team that played great,” East Tech coach Brett Moore said after his club was sidelined at 24-4. “I hope Coach Flannery and his team are great again tomorrow and bring the championship back to the Cleveland area.”

While the Scarabs were fighting an uphill battle, the challenge became virtually impossible when All-Ohioan Kyauta Taylor suffered a high ankle sprain with 4:16 to go in the half and St. Ed leading 35-21.

“It hurt because I felt like we had a little momentum going,” Moore said.

“We had a goal to try to cut the lead to eight by half. It hurt because we rely on KT to score a lot.”

Taylor averaged 25.2 points per game this year and has more than 1,000 career points.

St. Ed led by as many as 33 and was on top 74-45 for the start of the fourth quarter. The Scarabs trimmed the margin to 19 at 82-63 against various combinations of the Eagle roster but the rally fell way short.

“We kept at them because if you ever give up hope, your kids give up hope,” Moore said. “We can’t ever have that. I was not going to let my

kids down by throwing in the towel and they didn't let me down.”
Will Meyer came off the bench for 14 points, five rebounds and four assists for the Eagles. Tony Vuhancih added 10 points.
Anthony Carmon had 16 points and three assists to lead East Tech.
Johnell Free added 15 points and Markell Johnson scored 13.