

By Pat Magers

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COLUMBUS - In a little more than two minutes, Canal Winchester Harvest Prep had itself a 6-0 lead in the Division IV state semifinal at Value City Arena Thursday.

Quick and slick, the Warriors were on the board in a heartbeat on Sean Blackburn's jumper and layups by Keith James and Rael Windley.

And leading scorer David Dennis Jr. had yet to take a shot.

But Louisville St. Thomas Aquinas wasn't concerned. The Knights have been down before.

Lots of times. To teams likely better than Harvest Prep. They lost to several of them, in fact.

So the bad start just wasn't that big of a deal.

"I called a timeout to tell them to relax," Aquinas coach Matt Hackenberg said. "But when I walked in the huddle, they were already telling each other to relax and that they were fine. So I just made something up real quick to fill the timeout."

And the Knights filled the game with a special energy. Some of it wasn't all that productive - they managed just 4-of-21 from 3-point range, for instance.

But Aquinas had enough positives to turn back the Warriors 54-41. The Knights will face another set of Knights in top-ranked Convoy Crestview in Saturday's 1:30 p.m. championship game. Unbeaten Crestview beat New Madison Tri-Village 54-50.

Aquinas stands 18-11 on the year after outing Harvest Prep at 26-2. A brutal schedule with the likes of Division III semifinalist Villa Angela-St. Joseph (twice), Garfield Heights Trinity, Cleveland Central Catholic, Youngstown Ursuline among others will invite 11-loss seasons.

The Knights do their thing with grit.

"A funny thing happened yesterday," Hackenberg said to open his postgame comments. "We went to BW3s and the waitress comes up to us and she goes, 'Is this a swim team?'"

"I think that kind of characterizes us a little bit because we don't exactly look the part," he said. "We don't look like a great team but we do the things necessary to win basketball games."

Aquinas managed to pull even by first quarter's end at 12-12 and did the same at the halfway point at 26-26.

When Anthony Moeglin drove for a layup 14 seconds into the second half, the Knights had lead for good.

Division IV co-player of the year Austin Hill's 3-pointer closed the third-quarter scoring and put Aquinas up 39-35. Then in the fourth quarter, the Knights took the ball to the hoop.

Pete Ruthe drove for a layup as did Moeglin as the Knights inched ahead 43-38. While Harvest Prep went nearly three minutes without scoring, sophomore Jacob Paul hit four straight foul shots and drove for a three-point play to make it 50-38.

The Warriors could come no closer than nine points.

"I thought we played pretty well defensively; it just wasn't our night at the offensive end," Harvest Prep coach David Dennis said. "A lot of it was their defense. I respect their defensive effort.

"I think we got stops when we needed to, we just didn't capitalize on them," he said. "And when they got stops, they capitalized on them.

"We got a foul call, we missed the foul shots. They got a foul call; they made theirs. That was the difference in the second half."

The Knights went 18-for-26 from the line while Harvest Prep finished 4-for-11.

Jacob led the winners with 15 points, including 9-for-9 from the line. Moeglin, who had 14 rebounds, and Hill each scored 11.

Dennis Jr. topped the Warriors with 12 points, nine rebounds and three steals. Gideon Woodson-Levey scored nine.

BIG THIRD LIFTS CRESTVIEW - In a battle of No. 1 vs. No. 2, the slight underdog had the upper hand in the first half.

Tri-Village harassed the Knights into 3-of-11 shooting in the first period and 5-of-20 for the half while building a 24-19 lead. If not for Crestview's six free throws, it could have been worse.

"We didn't play the first half we would have like to have played," Crestview coach Jeremy Best said. "Credit goes to Tri-Village for that. I think they imposed their will on us the first half.

"I thought after halftime the difference was noticeable in our body language, in our purpose on the floor," he said.

The Knights scored the first seven points of the third quarter and regained the lead for the first time since late in the first period.

Tyson Bolenbaugh led the Knights with 15 points and eight rebounds, with seven points and four boards coming in the third.

"At halftime coach was telling us to pump fake because they were leaving their feet a lot," Bolenbaugh said. "Coach told me to stay engaged at halftime and all the credit to my teammates for staying with me. Once I saw one fall, it felt good."

The Knights led 34-28 at the quarter break and the margin remained in the 5-to-8-point range until Tri-Village chipped away in the final minute. The Patriots trimmed it to 50-47 with 17 seconds left but two foul shots each by Damian Helm and Connor Lautzenheiser sealed it.

"Their pressure began to wear us down and we had a really poor third quarter," Tri-Village coach Josh Sagester said. "They are athletic out front. I don't think they got us the first quarter, I don't think they got us the second quarter, but in third, we started wearing down a bit."

Cam Etzler had 13 points and five steals and Helm went 10-for-10 from the line while getting shut out from the field. The Knights were 22-for-27 and Tri-Village 10-for-13 from the stripe.

Co-player of the year Tyler Cook had 20 points and eight rebounds and his cousin, Damion Cook, added 16 points and nine boards for the Patriots.

YEAH, THAT DAVID DENNIS - Harvest Prep coach David Dennis played his college ball at Tiffin University, lettering three times in a career that spanned 1990-93.

Dennis was mostly a role player with the Dragons. He had 370 points, 243 rebounds and 101 assists in his career. He was a teammate of TU all-time leading scorer and rebounder Jeff Ward for three seasons.

Those numbers amounted to roughly two-thirds of a season for son Dennis Jr., who played at Hilliard Darby for two years while Harvest Prep served a two-year suspension from tournament play due to OSHAA rules violations.

Junior averaged 22 points, six rebounds and nearly five assists per game this year.

"He's worked very hard this year and was a big part of our turnaround," Dennis Sr. said of a club that went from nine wins a year ago to 26-2 this year.

SIX FOULS, BUT WHO'S COUNTING? - Although Tri-Village junior Colton Linkous set a school record with 90 3-point goals this year, he was limited to just 1 for 3 from long range.

Still, Linkous' night was notable as he set an unannounced state-tournament record not likely to be matched when he picked up his sixth personal foul with four seconds to play.

Linkous picked up his fifth foul and slowly walked toward the bench with 16 seconds to play. He knew it. The scoreboard showed it. Only no one made him leave the floor.

"I don't know. I don't know," said Sagester, who had a sub ready but didn't need him. "No one said anything to me."

His foul to send Lautzenheiser to the line is listed in the play-by-play notes as his sixth. He left the floor this time.

Linkous' line in the official final box score showed eight points, three rebounds, three assists, six turnovers and six fouls.