

Division II

Monster Truckers

By Pat Magers

Sports Writer

COLUMBUS – Two weeks ago, even last week, some might have assumed that off-target loft Grant Hull sent rimward in the first quarter was just another miss for a struggling shooter.

But no, it was intentional and teammate Jeff Thomas knew just what to do with it. He grabbed the ball and slammed it home.

Norwalk was flying high one last time in the first half on Ohio high school basketball's stage of stages and in the second half, the Truckers were steady and determined.

The combination meant a Division II state title as Norwalk downed last year's champ, Columbus Bishop Watterson, 65-58 in front of 14,642 at Value City Arena Saturday.

"My biggest fear was that our lack of size might catch up with us at some point in time," said Norwalk coach Steve Gray. "But I learned a long time ago, never question the heart of a champion. And these guys are champions."

The foundation was laid with a 16-2 run over a five-minute span at the end of the first quarter and start of the second.

It began with the alley-oop pass from Hull to Thomas for a dunk that tied the game at 14-14 with 2:13 left in the first period.

"That was a designed play," Thomas, a first-team All-Ohioan who totaled 18 points and 10 rebounds, said. "A lot of teams don't know it. It's kind of been our secret."

Point guard Ben Haraway, who led Norwalk (29-1) with 29 points, three assists, three blocks and a steal, went to work with a couple layups in transition. Thomas then turned a steal into another dunk for a 20-14 Trucker lead at the quarter break.

The run continued after Watterson's Matt Lehmann opened the second with a couple foul shots. Back in a groove, Hull nailed a 3-pointer off an inbound pass, Breck Turner had a putback and Haraway drove for a three-point play to push the margin to 28-16 with 6:07 left in the half.

"That was huge, no question," Watterson coach Vince Lombardo said. "We spent the rest of the game trying to battle back. We made some runs, but we couldn't get all the way back.

"Norwalk did an outstanding job early attacking our zones," he said. "They got good looks and they hit big shots."

The Truckers went more than four minutes before their next score, but the defense only allowed three Matt Hughes points for Watterson during the stretch.

The Truckers hit 12-of-22 in taking a 31-19 halftime lead. Watterson managed just 6-of-25 at that point, including 1-of-9 from 3-point range.

Norwalk kept the Eagles at arm's length, leading by as many as 14 and as few as seven before taking a 42-33 edge to the fourth.

There was a huge scare, however, when Haraway turned an ankle and suffered a slight twist of his right knee on a drive with 3:59 to go. He hit a foul shot for a 50-42 lead before going to the sideline.

"At first, I thought I was going to be out for a while," Haraway said. "But once I got up and was able to walk a little, it was fine."

"Oh my God," Gray said of his first reaction to the injury. "I was concerned for his health obviously, but we've had other players step up all year and I just felt that Jeff or Grant, someone would take over. But I was happy when the trainer said he could go back in."

The Eagles chipped at the lead and pulled to within four at 61-57 on Hughes' layup with 52

seconds left.

“Down four, I was thinking if we could just get one more possession...,” Hughes said, his voice trailing.

But Haraway’s total included 15 free throws and he was 12-for-16 in the fourth quarter. He converted four straight after the Hughes basket to seal it.

“I would have preferred (to foul) someone else, but obviously, he was the guy they wanted to have the ball,” Lombardo said.

Hull hit a couple 3-pointers and finished with eight points and four assists to back Haraway and Thomas. Turner scored five and Kaleb Cashen came off the bench to grab six rebounds.

Hughes had 23 points and 10 rebounds for the Eagles (26-3). Cody Calhoun added 15 points and Lehmann finished with 11.

THREE FOR ALL – Norwalk’s boys basketball championship is the third for a Northern Ohio League school in the 92 years of the state tournament.

Bellevue won the Class A championship in 1945 and Upper Sandusky claimed the Division II crown in 2005.

Norwalk also won a state football championship in 1974.

‘D’ IS THE BIG KEY – What Norwalk did at the offensive end was fairly typical. The Truckers shot 48 percent from the field, 44 percent from 3-point range and 70 percent from the foul line. More important was what they did at the defensive end. Watterson managed just 19-of-57 from the field, 4-of-24 from 3-point range. The Eagles missed 14 of their first 15 from long range.

“We wanted to give the post players looks outside of 15 feet, stay down and we wanted to stick with the point guard (Calhoun), who is just an unbelievable competitor,” Gray said. “And what about the job Jordan Johnson did on (Lehmann)? I thought he was unbelievable.”

Lombardo said he had hoped for better.

“I have great confidence in our shooting ability. My philosophy was pretty much to get out of the way of the offense,” he said. “We had some looks but today they didn’t go in. You certainly have to give credit to Norwalk for some of that.”

GRAY MORE THAN ONE UP – Lombardo said Saturday’s championship game was not the first time the two have matched basketball wits.

“It was a long time ago but yes, when I was in Marion and he was at Ridgedale, we went up against each other,” Lombardo said. “Given the state of my team at Marion Catholic, he probably got me then, too.”

THIS TIME HE BELONGS – During postgame, Gray shot a glance at long-time Ohio High School Athletic Association assistant Jim Wharton and told a story about a time he got an up-close view he shouldn’t have had for a past state tournament game.

“When (Norwalk assistant) coach (Tom) Foster was (assistant) coach at Lexington for the 1989 state tournament, a radio station gave me a credential so I could sit on press row,” Gray said.

“That young man (Wharton) in the corner during the press conference must have said, ‘Who’s that guy?’ and he threw me out.

“I’m glad they let me stay in here today,” he said.

COMMUNITY HEROES – Gray said his club’s state championship was well earned and much

deserved.

“If we had lost in the district tournament, it really wouldn’t have been fair because these kids wouldn’t have gotten the respect they deserve,” Gray said. “But win or lose, these kids are people of great character and they represented themselves so well.

“And the young people in our community look up to them so much,” he said. “There was a fourth- and fifth- and sixth-grade banquet two Sundays ago and all the seniors were there signing autographs for the kids. They’re rock stars.”

That was just one more reason for Gray’s line during opening post-game comments. “It’s great to be a Trucker,” he said.

Division III

Thunderbirds upset powerful Vikings

By Pat Magers

Sports Writer

COLUMBUS — Someone suggested a David-vs.-Goliath mentality, but Frank Kill was having none of that.

So maybe there is no fitting analogy, but you can score one for the little guys nevertheless — a very big one, in fact — after Lima Central Catholic stoned Cleveland Villa Angela-St. Joseph 64-62 to win the Division III state championship at Value City Arena Saturday afternoon.

“At the beginning of the season, we had a saying back at school: ‘Every champion was once a contender,’” Kill said after his club closed a 25-4 year on the highest note. “Today, we can now finally call ourselves champions.”

It came by a small margin against the biggest of foes. And if not for a couple inches, it would not have come about at all. That was all that was missing when VASJ’s Brian Parker heaved a last-second 60-footer that grazed the rim.

The Thunderbirds gave up a little more than three inches per man in the starting lineups. When coaches went to the bench, it didn’t get any better.

St. Joseph (22-8) had 6-foot-10 Carlton Bragg, 6-foot-8 Dererk Pardon and co-player of the year Parker, who is 6-foot-2 but who plays much bigger. Lima countered with the likes of 5-foot-9 Xavier Simpson and 6-foot-1 Martryce Kimbrough, another co-player of the year.

Had Parker’s attempted miracle found the mark, it would have been the Vikings’ only lead of the day.

But with Kimbrough nailing an opening 3-pointer toward a 10-point first quarter and 22-point night, the Spartans virtually had the upper hand throughout.

Lima Central Catholic led 20-14 at the first stop, and with Kimbrough hitting a couple more 3-pointers and 6-foot-2 Jake Williams stunning the Vikes with three inside hoops, the Spartans pushed the margin to 34-25 at half.

“Really some of those were shots we’d like them to take, high twos and floaters and the like,” Viking coach Babe Kwasniak said. “We put Brian on (Kimbrough) in the second half and he did a nice job. Woulda, shoulda, coulda, maybe we stayed in the zone a little too long.

“But those guards of theirs, they’re not only talented, their basketball IQ is through the roof,” he said. “They have a great understanding of the game and they found ways.”

Parker slowed Kimbrough considerably in the second half, but that’s when Simpson, who had 18 points, three assists and two steals, took over.

Simpson scored eight and Williams added four as Lima stretched the margin to as many as 14 at 41-27 before settling for a 49-41 edge through three.

But the Viking inside strength of Bragg (23 points) and Pardon (17 points, 15 rebounds) wouldn't go away and down the stretch, it began to wear.

Three-point plays by Parker (15 points) and Pardon narrowed the gap and Bragg drew a foul on his first rebound of the game and hit two foul shots to tie it at 51-51 with 4:31 to go.

The T-birds could have helped their cause considerably with a better effort from the foul line.

After making their only two attempts in the first half, they went 12-for-26 the rest of the way.

"Obviously, free throws are simple but what's simple isn't always easy," Kill said. "Free throws are something that everybody misses, but we made enough of them to win."

The Vikings could never get a lead. Simpson scored six down the stretch, including a crowd-pleasing floater down the lane over Pardon.

"I've never been a big fan of the floater, but I loved it today," Kill said.

Simpson's foul shot with 11 seconds to go gave LCC a 63-59 lead but Bragg hit a 3-pointer with four seconds left to trim it to one.

Williams (12 points, seven rebounds) was fouled before LCC could inbound. He missed both but rushed in for the rebound and passed to Tre Cobbs. He was fouled and made one free throw.

The Thunderbirds then held their breath as Parker's three-quarter court try just missed.

"Not in my heart," Kill said when asked if this win was an upset. "I've always said we were the No. 1 team. It's unfortunate that certain press writers don't give us the credit or whatever.

"They were 6-10, 6-8, they have the look," he said. "But it's not always the look, it's what's in the heart. I don't see this as an upset.

"Were they Goliath? Yeah, by height standards, but we were definitely not David today."

They are, however, Division III state champions.

Division IV

Crestview's near-perfect quarter leads to perfect season

By Pat Magers

Sports Writer

COLUMBUS — It wasn't a perfect third quarter. For one thing, it began with Damian Helm's miss on a 3-pointer.

But just about everything else Helm and his Convoy Crestview teammates did in that eight-minute span was a positive.

Owners of a 26-23 lead at halftime, Crestview scored the first 18 points of the second half and there was no stopping them from there.

In a battle of Knights, Crestview had by far the superior armor in the form of an unyielding defense while blowing past Louisville St. Thomas Aquinas 71-44 for the Division IV state championship at Value City Arena Saturday afternoon.

Crestview became the winningest undefeated team in Ohio high school history with a 29-0 mark while sending Aquinas home as an 18-12 runner-up.

"It's awesome when you have Smalltown, USA like we have," Crestview coach Jeremy Best said of the school's second state championship. The other was in 2003.

"Just the tradition of our basketball program through the years, it's really special," he said.

"There were a lot of people before us who put a lot of time in this program and we've tried to keep it going. That's what makes it special."

Connor Lautsenheiser hit a couple 3-pointers and Tyson Bolenbaugh hit three inside hoops to spark the offensive portion of the Crestview burst. But it was founded upon defense — Crestview had three steals and Aquinas had seven turnovers in the quarter.

It wasn't until the 2:50 mark that Aquinas advanced when Pete Ruthe hit a jumper in the lane. By that time, Crestview was in command at 44-25.

"That is a pretty unique run," Best said. "You put together an 18-0 run, that's good stuff. We've had runs at different times of the season and we can be explosive.

"Once we starting getting some turnovers and some runouts, that's when it gets pretty good," he said.

While Aquinas was unable to get much going, it wasn't for lack of trying.

"Our hand was kind of forced because we were never really able to take control of the game," Aquinas coach Matt Hackenberg said. "It started with the way they set the tone defensively from the beginning.

"We tried moving them around, we tried spacing, we tried to run sets, we tried ball screens, we tried all the stuff we're capable of and do pretty well," he said. "But we just couldn't break through."

While offense is supposed to be the fun thing, the Crestline players know where their game begins.

"Defense is the main thing coach stresses," point guard Cam Etzler said. "Eventually it allows us to get in transition and for us, transition is probably one of our stronger points."

Helm led the winners with 20 points. Bolenbaugh added 18 points with eight rebounds while Lautzenheiser (six assists) and Preston Zaleski scored 11 and 10, respectively.

Anthony Moeglin led Aquinas with 10 points and five rebounds. Sam Pusateri added nine points and Austin Hill contributed six points and six boards.