

Linn-Mar, IC West: Familiar foes with contrasting styles

Written by Jim Ecker

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There won't be any surprises when Linn-Mar plays Iowa City West in the semifinals of the Class 4A girls state basketball tournament Friday in Des Moines.

Tipoff at Wells Fargo Arena is scheduled for noon.

Linn-Mar likes to pound the ball inside to All-American center Kiah Stokes and let the 6-foot-3 senior go to work, relying on her deft touch and ambidextrous moves.

Iowa City West, by contrast, likes to run, press and launch 3-pointers at every opportunity, preferring an up-tempo game that produces turnovers and points in clusters.

If Stokes has a really big game, the Lions will probably win. If Iowa City West turns the game into a track meet, the Women of Troy will greatly increase their odds.

"They're a fast-paced team and they love to run," said Stokes, who averages 25.2 points. "I think we just have to play our game, whether we want to run or whether we want to do a halfcourt set, because we do have a height advantage. It just depends on how the game is going."

Linn-Mar and Iowa City West don't need any fancy scouting reports at this stage of the season. They know each other from the Mississippi Valley Conference, they saw each other play in the quarterfinals Wednesday and know what to expect.

The Lions whipped the Women of Troy, 63-49, in their only meeting this season Dec. 21 at Linn-Mar, but that was more than 10 weeks ago. It might make Linn-Mar confident, it might make Iowa City West even more determined or it might have absolutely nothing to do with Friday's outcome at all.

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Iowa City West has a young team. Remarkably, its top seven scorers are all underclassmen, led by sophomore Ally Disterhoft at 15.1 points per game. Junior Piper McKenzie, a transfer from Keokuk, is second on the club at 11.4 points.

Iowa City West appears to have more balance than Linn-Mar, with seven players averaging 5.6 to 15.1 points. Linn-Mar is top-heavy, with Stokes at 25.1 and nobody else in double figures. Only three other Lions average more than four points per game: Jenna Eells (8.4), Mykaela Brandt (7.1) and Kailee Karr (6.6.).

The Lions got 16 points off the bench from Shanice Cheatham and Courtney Major in their 48-47 victory over Ankeny in the quarterfinals Wednesday and they could be vital again.

"We need all the players on our team to win the game," said Stokes. "I think my teammates are understanding that now. They're getting a lot better, especially coming off the bench."

Still, Stokes is Stokes, the heavy favorite for Miss Basketball and a University of Connecticut signee.

"Tall task," said Iowa City West Coach B.J. Mayer. "Kiah is really good."

One of the biggest differences in Linn-Mar and Iowa City West comes from beyond the 3-point arc. The Lions have made only 68 triples all season (less than three per game), while the Women of Troy have made 139 3-pointers (nearly six per game).

Iowa City West shot 9-for-19 on 3-pointers in its 67-58 victory against Cedar Rapids Washington in the quarterfinals Wednesday. Meanwhile, Linn-Mar was 1-for-3 on 3-pointers in its nailbiter against Ankeny in the opening round.

Iowa City West has come up with 359 steals this season (15 per game), while Linn-Mar has collected 182 (about 8 per game).

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"We definitely have to take care of the ball," said Linn-Mar Coach Mike Brandt. "Their pressure, their quick guards ... And we've got to match up on their shooters."

Their styles are different, but the results have been the same. Both teams are 22-2 overall, both teams finished 14-2 in the Mississippi Valley Conference, both teams won MVC division titles and both teams are highly ranked, with Linn-Mar No.2 in the final IGHS AU poll and Iowa City West No.3.

The other semifinal Friday matches top-ranked Des Moines East (24-0) against No.5 Southeast Polk (23-2) in a battle of CIML teams at 1:45 p.m.

Linn-Mar is the defending state champion, but Stokes is the only returning starter from that club.