

Hempstead stuns No. 5 Kennedy boys

Written by Tom Fruehling

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The Dubuque Hempstead boys had Kennedy right where they wanted them for Friday night's Class 4A substate semifinal in the Kennedy gym.

The underachieving Mustangs (11-12) had lost to the fifth-ranked Cougars (17-5) just last week by a 77-60 margin that wasn't as close as the score indicated.

Kennedy, meanwhile, was coming off of an emotional 63-57 overtime win at Cedar Falls a week ago and was favored to advance to next Tuesday's substate final.

And Hempstead, a 50-47 upset winner at Bettendorf on Monday, was again playing on the road, where it oddly enough lost only two games all year.

So, it was not all that surprising for the Stangs (as they're identified on their warm-up jerseys) to convincingly whip Kennedy 58-54 in last night's rematch.

"It's been the story of our season," Cougars Coach Bob Fontana said.. "Every time we've had a big win this year – over Washington, over Jefferson and then over Cedar Falls – we haven't played well the next game.

"And, obviously, our guys didn't come out focused tonight. We didn't deserve to win. But hats off to Hempstead. They made the plays. We didn't."

It was a sloppy start for the Cougars.

They seemed befuddled by the Mustangs' zone defense and could only muster nine points in the first quarter. They had more turnovers than baskets.

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"We didn't attack their zone at all," Fontana said. "And our passing was horrible."

Hempstead, on the other hand, held onto the ball and played cautiously and patiently on offense.

Its two tiny and sure-handed guards, TJ Johnson and Brad Duwe, worked the ball around until the Mustangs' one true big man, 6-foot-5 senior Gage Heffernan, broke free around the rim.

Heffernan, an all-MVC-conference blue chipper still awaiting a college scholarship, was a one-man wrecking crew, racking up 26 points against the far bulkier Kennedy front line.

"We knew we aren't as athletic as they are," he said. "So we had to play hard and play with heart and use our quickness to stay with them."

He also credited Hempstead Coach Curt Deutsch for coming up with the idea of throwing a zone defense against the Cougars.

"We didn't use (the zone) the first time," Heffernan pointed out. "It was one of the tricks we had up our sleeves."

After trailing 10-9 after the first quarter, Kennedy did manage to squeeze out a 22-21 lead at halftime.

It was clear, though, that the undermanned Mustangs were not intimidated.

"Over the last eight weeks, we've played some very good basketball," Deutsch said. "We've just gotten better game after game. So we came in here with some confidence."

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Forcing so many early turnovers, he said, gave his team even more grit.

"They put up 77 points on us last time, so we knew we had to make some defensive stops and keep them off the boards. I think we did a pretty job on both of them."

Heffernan was a bull around the basket in the third quarter. When he hit a 3-pointer at the buzzer, it gave him 20 points for the night and his team a 40-32 lead.

Kennedy couldn't recover, although it did cut the deficit down to 48-45 on a 3-pointer by Jake Misener with two minutes to play.

The Cougars kept fouling the rest of the way, and Hempstead kept missing free throws to keep the game close.

But, finally, Johnson sank both free throws with 29 seconds left to give the Mustangs a comfortable five-point cushion.

Hempstead plays Cedar Rapids Washington next Tuesday at 8 p.m. at the US Cellular Center for a chance to go to the state tournament.

HEMPSTEAD (58): TJ Johnson 3 4-5 10, Bradley Duwe 3 1-3 7, Alex Smith 1 2-6 4, Cody Leach 4 0-0 8, Connor Sindberg 0 3-4 3, Gage Heffernan 10 5-8 26. Totals 21 15-26 58.

KENNEDY (54): Jacob Manning 4 2-2 10, Darius Fuller 1 2-2 4, Jacob Misener 3 0-0 7, Trevor Heitland 0 1-2 1, Herschel Dixon 1 0-0 2, Kyle Lamaak 4 4-5 13, Josiah Coleman 7 0-1 15, Christian French 0 0-2 0. Totals 21 9-14 54.

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Halftime -- Kennedy 22, Hempstead 21. 3-point goals -- Hempstead 1 (Heffernan), Kennedy 3 (Coleman, Lamaak, Misener). Total fouls -- Hempstead 16, Kennedy 24. Fouled out -- Leach, Misener.