

J-Hawks escape and are off to state

Written by Jim Ecker

Tuesday, 01 March 2011 23:17 - Last Updated Wednesday, 02 March 2011 00:11

CEDAR FALLS -- The collective "Phew" could be heard all the way back to the west side of Cedar Rapids Tuesday night.

The Jefferson boys basketball team is going back to the state tournament for the ninth time in school history.

Barely. Sparingly. Nervously.

It was eighth-ranked Jefferson 57, underdog Waterloo West 55 in the Class 4A substate finals at the McLeod Center on the University of Northern Iowa campus. And "Phew" doesn't begin to describe how the J-Hawks escaped.

Jefferson (17-5) will face third-ranked Des Moines Hoover (21-2) in the opening round of the state tournament on Wednesday, March 9 at 8:15 p.m. at the Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

DiMarco Mallett missed a 3-pointer at the buzzer Tuesday night that would have given Waterloo West (9-15) an improbable trip to the state tournament with a losing record.

"We kept saying, 'Give ourselves a chance, Give ourselves a chance,' and we did," said Waterloo West Coach Justin Little. "We had a shot. It looked good to me and it just missed."

Jarrold Uthoff and his long arms bothered Mallett just enough on the final shot of this tense chess match. The J-Hawks whipped Waterloo West by 30 points in January at Waterloo West, but the Wahawks upset Cedar Falls in the substate semifinals last Friday and were hungry for more.

"It was kind of ripe for an upset," said Jefferson Coach Stu Ordman. "They had nothing to lose."

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On the other hand, Jefferson had everything to lose.

"We knew they'd be coming after us," said J-Hawk senior Tyler Meiborg, who scored eight points. "We beat them by 30 at their place earlier in the year. They wanted revenge, and they were coming off that huge win against Cedar Falls."

Jefferson opened a 46-35 lead early in the fourth quarter on a basket by Alec Saunders, but Waterloo West refused to fold. The Wahawks crept closer and closer until they finally tied the game, 55-55, on a bucket by Mallett with 90 seconds left.

The J-Hawks killed the clock, playing for the final shot, but an opportunity popped up that was too good to ignore. Dale Jones, who riddled Jefferson with five 3-pointers and 19 points, tried to steal a pass intended for Uthoff but was a half-second late. Uthoff grabbed the ball, saw a clear path to the basket and took off.

Uthoff went for the dunk, but Dominick Smith got there in time for Waterloo West and committed a hard foul, preventing the dunk but sending Uthoff to the foul line for two shots with 13.6 seconds left in the ballgame.

"Pretty nerve-wracking," said Uthoff, an excellent free throw shooter. "I've had several opportunities to shoot with the game on the line, but it's tough every time."

Uthoff was money, as usual. He swished both free throws for a 57-55 advantage. "That's why he's probably going to be Mr. Basketball," said Little.

There were still 13.6 seconds to go.

It became a scramble in the final seconds as Waterloo West looked for a shot to tie or win.

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Jones was the first option, but Mallett was option No.2 and had a decent look, partially obscured by Uthoff and his lanky 6-foot-8 frame.

The ball hit the far side of the rim and bounced away, and that collective "pew" escaped the mouths of J-Hawk fans everywhere.

"The key is to survive and advance," said Ordman, who is taking the J-Hawks to the state tournament for the second straight season. "I'm happy for our players and the families and our fans at the school and for the southwest side community."

Waterloo West spread the court, slowed the tempo, tried to lure Uthoff away from the basket on defense and bumped into the Wisconsin-bound senior every chance it could. The J-Hawks scored only three points in the first quarter but trailed only 6-3.

"I thought they had interesting strategies," said Ordman, who had to devise his own. "I felt we had to play loosey-goosey and just drive the ball and try to create, instead of running some special sets."

Jefferson exploded for 25 points in the second quarter and grabbed a 28-20 edge at intermission, then made the first two baskets of the second half for a 32-20 bulge, the biggest of the night. But the J-Hawks committed a few turnovers and took a few quick shots, giving Waterloo West a chance to get back in the game.

Jones was Waterloo West's biggest man on the court at 6-foot-5, but he did most of his damage from behind the 3-point line with his five triples. He was Mr. Outside and 5-foot-9 Trent Washington (15 points) was Mr. Inside, driving fearlessly to the basket.

The Wahawks rallied and had momentum on their side, sensing an upset, but the J-Hawks managed to hold on. "They kind of slowed our momentum down and made us second-guess ourselves," offered Uthoff, who finished with 26 points.

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Jefferson lost in the first round of the 2010 state tournament last year, but the J-Hawks will be sorely disappointed if it happens again this year.

"We didn't really expect to make state last year, coming into last season," said Meiborg. "We expected to go to state this year, so it's a little different feeling. If we are one-and-done again, it will be pretty devastating to all of us."

Uthoff will get to perform on the biggest stage for prep basketball players in Iowa, perhaps helping his chances of winning the Mr. Basketball Award. He's looking forward to the trip.

"It's exciting, especially my senior year, finishing my career and going back to state," he said. "Hopefully we'll be able to win a couple of games there."

Jefferson lost to Sioux City East, 51-43, in the opening round of the state tournament last year.

Saunders scored nine points for the J-Hawks Tuesday. Ky Kramer netted eight and Taylor Olson scored six points.

Ordman used only six players. The only substitute was sophomore guard Creighton Robinson, making just his second appearance with the varsity all season.

Uthoff hit 12 of 13 free throws. Overall, the J-Hawks were 19 of 22 at the foul line.

WATERLOO WEST (55): McMahon 1 0-0 2, Moore 0 1-2 1, Jones 6 2-3 19, D.Smith 2 2-4 7, Washington 6 3-4 15, Johnson 1 0-0 2, C. Smith 1 1-1 3, Mallett 2 2-2 6. Totals 18 11-16 55.

JEFFERSON (57): Kramer 4 0-0 8, Saunders 2 5-6 9, Uthoff 6 12-13 26, Olson 2 2-3 6, Meiborg 4 0-0 8, Robinson 0 0-0 0. Totals 18 19-22 57.

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Halftime -- Jefferson 28, Waterloo West 20. 3-point goals -- Waterloo West 6 (Jones 5, D. Smith), Jefferson 2 (Uthoff 2).