

Giant-killing Cougars strike down Prairie

Written by Sher Jasperse

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If they keep this up, they'll have to stop calling them upsets.

For the third time this month, unranked Kennedy toppled a ranked opponent, beating No. 8 Prairie, 58-52, Tuesday night on their home court.

The Cougars upset No. 6 Ames on Saturday night and stunned then-No. 9 Washington on January 6. They have won four straight and five of seven contests in January to raise their record to 8-6 overall, 6-5 in the Mississippi Valley Conference, setting up the possibility of an interesting finish in the Mississippi Division race.

It was only a matter of time before his young team would snare some big wins, said Kennedy Coach Dennis Roloff, whose Cougars were 3-4 at the end of December after letting some close contests slip away.

"We're getting experience, and the kids are maturing and they're getting much better and they're believing in themselves. Their confidence is there. I've told them all along that we were going to be able to do that, and they're believing it."

Prairie (11-4, 8-3) had won eight in a row and was up by three after three quarters, but the Cougars nailed a perfect 14 of 14 from the free throw line in the final period, led by Cool Hand Courtney Strait with six, to turn back the Hawks.

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Standing on the line was just where she wanted to be in the fourth quarter, said Strait, who led all scorers with 20 points and 10 rebounds.

"This year when I'm shooting free throws I just don't even think about anything other than the basket. I have the most experience in the high-pressure games and I know I'm going to be confident at the line, so it's easier for me to have the ball than people who are going to panic."

Her teammates Madi Meier, Stephanie Botkin and Jordan Holmes also hit their free throws down the stretch.

"Courtney is one of the best in the state in shooting free throws," said Roloff. "She's got the school record of 23 in a row and she's shooting 80-some percent, but the other kids followed through tonight, too."

Prairie set a torrid pace with its fast break offense to start the game and was up 13-12 at the end of the first period. In the second, the Cougars were able to break the Hawks' press, as Strait scored four field goals and Meier and Paige Hendrickson hit the Cougars' only 3-pointers of the evening to push their team to a 28-18 halftime lead.

A determined Prairie came back recharged after the break, outscoring Kennedy 19-6 to take a 37-34 lead after three periods.

But Kennedy stayed poised and scored three quick baskets to start the fourth, then clung to a slim lead.

With a minute left in the game, Prairie's Alisa Weiland hit a 3-pointer and, after Kennedy was called for a travel. Cyerra Hutchins scored a free throw to pull the Hawks to within two, 54-52. But the Cougars sealed the victory with four final bullets from the charity stripe.

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"The girls turned it around in the fourth," said Roloff. "We said, 'Hey, pick it up,' and they did. They came out and they played hard, and whenever you catch a couple of baskets, it's boom boom, and they caught the fire. We've been fading in the fourth quarter in a lot of our games and that's where we're maturing. We're starting to play the fourth quarter very well."

Doser, whose own young squad has experienced a remarkable turnaround from last year, said his team fought to the finish but couldn't find its rhythm in the final period.

"We battled back from an 8-0 deficit and then got up three going into the fourth. I thought that would be a good momentum thing, but they came out and hit some shots and we had a couple of turnovers that made it a 7-0 run for them and we just didn't recover.

"Kennedy knocked down some big shots and they knocked down free throws at the end. That's what it takes to win these tight games and Kennedy did it, so the credit goes to them."

Strait, the state's top 4A scorer with a game average of 21.2, has scored the lion's share of her team's points in several contests, but says the team's more balanced offense in the past month is helping to put them back in the win column.

"Experience-wise, we've just turned the corner. Right now we're not focused at all about who's scoring the points. It's just getting the job done. Earlier in the season some of our younger kids would worry too much about mistakes and that would psyche them out in a game. We're just getting so confident in each other that we can say, 'Just forget it and move on,' and that's going to give them confidence to go right back and make a basket."

Hendrickson added 13 points and Botkin 12 for the Cougars. The Hawks were led by Weiland and freshman bench player Emilie Rotter with 13 points each.

The Cougars will take aim at another ranked team when they play No. 10 Iowa City High Friday night at home. The Hawks play at Linn-Mar on Friday.

PRAIRIE (52): Kaitlyn Yanacek 0 1-2 1, Cyerra Hutchins 4 1-2 9, Alisa Weiland 5 2-2 13,

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Courteney McCrary 4 2-2 11, Madison Dellamuth 1 1-2 4, Mackenzie Serbousek 0 1-2 1, Emilie Rotter 6 1-2 13. Totals 20 9-14 52.

KENNEDY (58): Madi Meier 3 2-2 9, Courtney Strait 7 6-6 20, Kaylese Johnson 0 0-0 0, Stephanie Botkin 4 4-4 12, Paige Hendrickson 6 0-0 13, Mariah Simmons 1 0-0 2, Jordan Holmes 0 2-2 2, Sarah Zinser 0 0-0 0, Capria Davis 0 0-0 0, Aryn Nelson 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 14-14 58.

Halftime – Kennedy 28, Prairie 18. 3-point goals – Prairie 3 (Weiland, McCrary, Dellamuth), Kennedy 2 (Meier, Hendrickson). Fouled out – none.