

No. 10 Cougars trimmed by No. 1 Trojans

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Iowa City West Trojans are No. 1 and still undefeated.

Barely.

Jeremy Morgan popped in 17 points Tuesday night as the Trojans nipped No. 10 Kennedy, 54-53, in a Mississippi Valley Conference battle in the Kennedy gym.

Iowa City West (18-0, 13-0) trailed 45-39 early in the fourth quarter, but the Trojans held Kennedy without a field goal for six minutes to nudge ahead and claim the victory.

The Cougars (13-5, 8-5) upset Linn-Mar Saturday night and jumped into the rankings this week. They gave the Trojans a tough game before falling short at the end.

"We kind of knew we were stepping into the belly of the beast there, coming off their big win Saturday," said Iowa City West Coach Steve Bergman, relieved to get the victory.

Morgan gave the Trojans a 46-45 lead with an inside move, then followed a half-minute later with a pair of free throws to make it 48-45. Wyatt Lohaus made it 49-45 with a foul shot with 3:21 left, completing a decisive 10-0 spurt.

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Myzeah Batie-Gaddy hit one free throw with 9.7 seconds remaining to give Iowa City West a 54-50 edge and make it a two-possession game. Darius Fuller nailed a 3-pointer for Kennedy with 1.5 seconds left to make it 54-53, but the Trojans successfully passed the ball inbounds after a Kennedy timeout to finish the win.

Kennedy Coach Bob Fontana was not claiming any moral victories after taking the No. 1 team in Class 4A to the wire.

"No," he said firmly. "Because you know what? I expected to win. So did our kids."

Josiah Coleman led the Cougars with 14 points. Fuller scored 10 points and hard-nosed guard Trevor Heitland added nine markers.

"I thought the big positive was how hard we played. And how we competed," Fontana said. "We had our moments where we did some good things offensively and good things defensively."

Fontana lamented the six-minute stretch in the fourth quarter when the Cougars saw their six-point lead evaporate and eventually turn into a five-point deficit. Kennedy's only marker during that spell came on a free throw.

Fontana counted six empty possessions where the Cougars were plagued by turnovers and errant shots. "They capitalized on them, too, when they made that run," he noted.

The Cougars upset then-No. 6 Linn-Mar Saturday night before taking No. 1 Iowa City West to the final seconds. It's not entirely what they wanted, but Fontana saw positive signs.

"I told our guys, we need to build on what we did well and we need to learn from what we didn't do well," he said. "We need to take steps forward. This time of year, the best teams take steps forward."

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Coleman made some sweet moves to the basket and said he enjoyed playing against the top team in the state.

"I love it. It just pushes me to get better, to make my team better," he said.

Coleman thinks the Cougars have improved with the postseason tournament on the horizon. "We're playing all these big teams and we're just getting better and better as a team," he said.

Bergman called a timeout with 7:14 left in the game after the Trojans fell behind 45-39. He implored his players to reduce their turnovers and play better defense, but it was Morgan who may have had the most important thing to say.

"During that timeout, Jeremy said 'I've got a guy who can't guard me in the post,'" Bergman related. "And we went in there and did a good job of posting up and got it into him a couple of times.

"That kind of changed the whole game," Bergman said. "That was him using his head and seeing something I hadn't seen. That was good."

Morgan sensed a mismatch and wanted the ball.

"I just said I have a smaller person on me, so let me try and score a couple of easy shots down low near the basket, because we weren't getting any good looks," he said.

The victory lifted the Trojans a step closer to two of their major goals.

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"Our first goal is to win conference and our second goal is going undefeated in the regular season," Morgan said, "and then obviously get down to the state tournament again."

Iowa City West visits Iowa City High Friday night with the MVC crown in sight. Kennedy visits Jefferson on Friday.

Dondre Alexander contributed 11 points for the Trojans. Lohaus scored eight points, while Jacob Gylten and Batie-Gaddy scored seven points apiece.

IOWA CITY WEST (54): Alexander 5 1-3 11, Morgan 4 7-8 17, Lohaus 3 2-3 8, Gylten 3 1-1 7, Batie-Gaddy 2 3-4 7, Swank 2 0-1 4, Bryant 0 0-0 0, Stewart 0 0-0 0. Totals 19 14-20 54.

KENNEDY (53): Heitland 4 1-2 9, Coleman 5 4-6 14, Fuller 4 0-0 10, Bell 1 2-2 5, Christians 3 1-1 7, Hayden 1 0-0 2, Struss 0 0-0 0, Jahlas 2 0-0 4, Martin 1 0-0 2. Totals 21 8-11 53.

Halftime - Iowa City West 27, Kennedy 26. 3-point goals - Iowa City West 2 (Morgan 2), Kennedy 3 (Fuller 2, Bell 1). Fouled out - Heitland.