

## **Linn-Mar boys on memorable ride**

Written by Jim Ecker

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LA CROSSE, Wis. -- The Linn-Mar Lions hope their path to the Class 4A state championship in Iowa runs through Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Coach Chris Robertson and the top-ranked Lions drubbed Apple Valley (Minn.) in Minneapolis last weekend, then hopped on the bus again Saturday and clipped Madison Memorial (Wis.) in La Crosse.

First they played at the Target Center, an NBA arena, then they played at the La Crosse Center, another big venue. First the Timberwolves Shootout, then the Midwest Players Classic.

That's on top of their rugged 16-game schedule in the Mississippi Valley Conference, a date at the U.S. Cellular Center and other tough non-conference games.

Robertson thinks the trips to Minnesota and Wisconsin are good for his team. As an added bonus, they won both games against quality, ranked opponents.

"It's nice to extend outside of the borders and play somebody really good," he said. "It's definitely going to help us come late February/early March as we get into our tournament run to have these experiences to draw back from."

Unfortunately for Linn-Mar, its game in Minneapolis turned out to be a dud. Two of Apple Valley's best players were hurt and the Lions rolled easily, 81-35.

Madison Memorial, ranked third among the big schools in Wisconsin, gave Linn-Mar a much better test. The Lions opened a 12-point lead, but Madison pulled within four points and forced Linn-Mar to execute with the game in doubt.

"It's great to get athletic competition like this," Linn-Mar junior Marcus Paige said following

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74-64 victory over Madison Memorial. "It's a really good test for our guys."

The Lions stayed overnight in Minneapolis after playing the late game at the Timberwolves Shootout, but they came back from La Crosse after performing in the Midwest Players Classic. They rode chartered buses on both trips.

"It's an opportunity to get away from home and play somebody different," Robertson noted. "I think it's a good experience for the guys, to be away. It's just the team, and they're together. It's a bonding thing."

The Lions enjoyed the trips, watching movies on the bus and playfully joking around, but it was all business when they arrived at the arenas for their games.

"It's fun going on the road with them. It really is," Robertson said. "As a coach, probably the greatest compliment I get is when people say how well-behaved they are when they go to a restaurant or go to a hotel.

"It's a great group for that," he said. "They tend to be able to lock in when they need to, but yet they have a great time."

Robertson knew he'd have a strong team. Paige has committed to North Carolina, Matt Bohannon has signed with Northern Iowa and Shane Benton has signed with North Dakota, giving the Lions three Division I players. Josh Montague and Ian McBrayer also hope to play in college, and performing in major events may give them a chance.

"Any exposure they get is going to help them," Robertson said. "When you go to an event like this, there's going to be someone from a Division II school, a mid-major, whatever. If the guys play well and they perform, maybe they'll get some opportunities."

Montague, a 6-foot-7 senior, poured in 19 points in the first half against Madison Memorial and

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finished with a career-high 21. His thoughts were on the team, however.

"Playing in these big arenas really gives us help for state and Wells Fargo, which also has a big floor," he said. "Also, playing great competition gets us ready for that long journey to state."

That's the bottom line for Linn-Mar: Winning a state title. That's why they played at Washington High School Friday night and made the three-hour trip to La Crosse on Saturday.

"Like I told them Friday night in the locker room, if we are fortunate to get to the state tournament and advance in the state tournament, we're going to have to play a really good team on a Friday and then we'll have to bounce back and play an even better team on Saturday," Robertson remarked.

"That's kind of where we are this weekend," he said, referring to Washington and Madison Memorial. "It's not state tournament time, but it certainly will help prepare us for that if we get there."

Linn-Mar is not the only road warrior in the Metro area. Kennedy played two games in Sioux City this month, while Washington played in the Timberwolves Shootout and will face Sioux City East in Des Moines next month.

"I think these are the memorable moments of a kid's high school career," Robertson said. "They're going to remember these games, probably more than they're going to remember going up to Dubuque Hempstead on a Tuesday night."

"They're going to remember making that La Crosse trip and making that Minneapolis trip," he said. "I guess the bottom line is, it's their high school career. Hopefully we can make some memorable moments for them."

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