

Cougars escape with Roloff's 300th win

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Somebody forgot to tell the spunky Marion girls it was supposed to be rollover for Roloff Saturday night at the Kennedy gym.

Veteran Cougar Coach Dennis Roloff was going for his 300th win in a 20-year career at the school. Not many figured the party would be spoiled by a middle-of-the-pack 6-14 team from the Class 3A Wamac conference.

But it took a couple of improbable turn of events in the last 37.5 seconds of a roller coaster game for Kennedy (8-13) to escape with a 50-49 near-miracle victory.

Roloff himself wasn't one of those who thought the big school/small school match-up would be in the bag.

"They're very well coached," he said after a post-game celebration at midcourt.

"We knew their kids would come ready to play and play hard. And for 31 minutes and 30 seconds or so, they played wonderful."

In fact, Coach Brian O'Donnell's Indians broke a 46-46 tie with one of two free throws by steady senior Kristin Kramer with two minutes to go.

After a jump ball gave the ball back to Marion, Kramer coolly dropped two more from the charity stripe to extend the lead to three with 1:20 left.

Then an air ball by Kennedy junior Mariah Simmons, who had come off the bench to score 11 crucial points, again put the ball in the Indians' hands with 1:07 remaining.

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At that point, said Cougar junior shooting star Courtney Strait, "We told each other that there was only a minute left, but we had to do it. We weren't going to lose this game."

As Marion tried holding the ball, Kennedy senior Kali Hildebrand got a steal and raced down court for a lay-up to cut the margin to 49-48.

The Indians had the ball with 37.5 seconds left when junior Dani Peyton, their high scorer for the night, was fouled by Cougar senior floor leader Olivia Meier.

"I thought then the game was over," Strait said. "Dani and I played together on the Cedar Rapids Panthers AAU team when we were in the fourth and fifth grade. And she's a great free throw shooter."

But on a night when she led her team with 15 points (including seven throws and two 3-pointers), Peyton missed twice.

While a relentless Marion defense had held the normally proficient Meier to a single free throw all night, she picked the right time for heroics by making a lay-up with 15 seconds in the game to put her team ahead 50-49.

That's when cruel fate struck again for Peyton, who time and again had hit clutch baskets or made a defensive stop just when her team needed it.

She charged down-court and, in a bang-bang play that could easily have gone the other way, was called for a charge as she drove the lane for what could have been the winning basket.

Game over.

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"It was a tough way to lose," said a disappointed O'Donnell. "But I told the girls that one play or one kid never loses a game.

"It was a heartbreaker, but there were a lot of positives we can take in the tournament. We made some mistakes; none of them were for lack of desire or lack of effort. And give Kennedy credit. They made some big plays down the stretch and found a way to win."

For Roloff, whose career record now stands at 300-154, the milestone win was especially sweet.

"It was a great, great game. I'll remember this one a lot more than I would have a 20-point blow out."

MARION (49): Kristin Kramer 3 5-6 13, Leah Smith 0 2-2 2, Jessie Kramer 1 0-0 2, Dani Peyton 3 7-10 15, Allysa Jones 4 1-2 9, Micaela Combs 2 3-4 8, Beth Knapp 0 0-0 0, Paige Perkins 0 0-0 0, Allison Scott 0 0-0 0, Brooke Cole 0 0-0 0, Ashley Kupka 0 0-0 0, Tori Pratt 0 0-0 0, Meghan Herren 0 0-0 0. Totals 13 18-24 49.

KENNEDY (50): Olivia Meier 1 1-2 3, Courtney Strait 8 1-2 19, Kassi Nunnikhoven 0 1-2 1, Shauna Happel 1 2-5 4, Kali Hildebrand 3 0-0 7, Kaylese Johnson 0 0-0 0, Mariah Simmons 4 3-3 11, Val Ross 1 1-2 3, Kristen Huebsch 1 0-0 2, Kim Muench 0 0-0 0, Ashley Schlueter 0 0-0 0, Dominique Wright 0 0-0 0, Haley Corkery 0 0-0 0. Totals 19 9-16 50.

Halftime – Marion 25, Kennedy 19. 3-point goals – Marion 5 (K.Kramer 2, Peyton 2, Combs), Kennedy 3 (Strait 2, Hildebrand). Total fouls – Marion 15, Kennedy 18.