

Strait, Meier lead Cougars to tourney win

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It wasn't always pretty, but Kennedy did what it had to in order to advance, winning 66-60 at Prairie on Wednesday night in the first round of the Class 4A girls regional tournament.

The Cougars (9-13) led by as many as 11 points in the second half but the Hawks (4-18) refused to give up, clawing their way back into the game. Kennedy's lead was only 51-49 with 6 minutes left, but the Cougars had an answer for every Prairie run and were able to fend off the Hawks.

"Prairie played outstanding and hard," Kennedy Coach Dennis Roloff said. "They play an aggressive game and if they don't get called they are in every game."

The Hawks just couldn't stop Kennedy's offensive duo of junior Courtney Strait and senior Olivia Meier, who led all scorers with 25 and 19 points, respectively.

"Those two, we could not stop the basketball," Prairie Coach Steve Doser said of Strait and Meier. "We really struggled stopping penetration and that killed us. Good players make plays and they did."

Prairie had a more balanced attack with four players reaching double digits. Senior Mackenzie Blaha scored 14 points, senior Shelby Crist and junior Kaitilyn Yanecek added 11 points apiece and sophomore Alisa Weiland chipped in 10 for the Hawks.

A big reason that Kennedy was able to stay in the lead down the stretch was free-throw shooting. After going 11-for-16 from the stripe in the first half, the Cougars hit seven of their first eight in the fourth quarter before missing their last two after the game was all but over.

"After every practice we shoot free throws and we are supposed to run after every free throw to help simulate a game situation," said Strait who was 9 of 10 from the line. "We put in people that we knew could relax, take their time and put in the shots. That's what we needed."

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The loss ends the season for Prairie, and Doser will be sorry to see his senior class go.

"It's been one of the most fun years I've ever had," he said. "We have a group of seniors that have done more in the community than I have ever had in 17 years, just good quality kids. So that part is really hard when you see those kind of kids leave your program."

Roloff, who will retire from teaching after this season and is contemplating retiring from coaching as well, has at least one more game to coach. The Cougars advance to face No. 10 Iowa City High in the regional semifinals Saturday in Iowa City. The Little Hawks swept Kennedy this season winning 69-52 and 67-51.

"We haven't shown them a lot of our different defenses," Strait said of City High. "We are going to have to play really hard against Virginia (Johnson) because she is one of the best players in the state. We have to shut her down."

KENNEDY (66): Johnson 2 2-4 7, Meier 6 6-9 19, Strait 7 9-10 25, Simmons 2 3-4 7, Huebsch 1 0-0 2, Nunnikhoven 2 0-0 4, Happel 1 0-0 2, Schultz 0 0-2 0, Wright 0 0-0 0, Muench 0 0-0 0, Ross 0 0-0 0, Schlueter 0 0-0 0, Hildebrand 0 0-0 0, Schultz 0 0-0 0, Kilinger 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 20-29 66.

PRAIRIE (60): Yanecek 5 0-0 11, Carver 2 1-2 5, Crist 5 1-1 11, Weiland 3 2-2 10, Wieland 1 0-1 2, McCrary 1 0-0 2, Blaha 5 0-0 14, Dellamuth 2 1-2 5, Hutchins 0 0-2 0, Tonyan 0 0-0 0, Gaster 0 0-0 0, Beisker 0 0-0 0, Carney 0 0-0 0, Neuhaus 0 0-0 0. Totals 24 5-10 60.

Halftime -- Kennedy 30, Prairie 26. 3-point goals -- Prairie 7 (Blaha 4, Weiland 2, Yanecek), Kennedy 4 (Strait 2, Meier, Johnson).