

Dynamic duo lead Lions past J-Hawks

Written by Jim Ecker

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Linn-Mar senior Matt Bohannon knows how to lighten the mood before a big game.

The top-ranked Lions, crippled and missing their two tallest starters, were about to play Jarrod Uthoff and the Jefferson J-Hawks Tuesday night when Bohannon said something on the bench that had everybody laughing.

The Lions were still smiling after the game.

Bohannon and Marcus Paige poured in 30 points apiece as Linn-Mar topped the 10th-ranked J-Hawks, 70-64, in a Mississippi Valley Conference game at Jefferson.

The 30 points were career highs for both players and lifted the Lions to their 20th straight win.

Bohannon and Paige couldn't remember what Bohannon said before the game, or perhaps they didn't want to share a secret.

"We just had to stay loose and make the guys feel comfortable," claimed Paige.

"I said we have to play bigger than ourselves tonight, we have to play taller tonight," countered Bohannon. "We did a good job of that."

Maybe Bohannon said something like this to Paige to draw a few guffaws before the game: "Marcus, I know you're a great point guard and you'll be going to North Carolina and all that, but just for fun, why don't you move to forward in our 2-3 zone and help us keep Uthoff under control. And we'll both score 30."

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Or something like that.

The Lions (20-0, 15-0 MVC) played without 6-foot-6 center Ian McBrayer (groin injury) and 6-7 forward Josh Montague (knee), so Coach Chris Robertson got creative and put five guards in the starting lineup and moved Paige to forward in their zone defense.

"I've never played the bottom of a 2-3 before," said Paige. "It was definitely something new."

Bohannon, a 6-foot-4 shooting guard, was the tallest starter for Linn-Mar, but the Lions managed to swarm all over Uthoff and limit his touches. Uthoff finished with 26 points, but it was an uphill struggle despite his four-inch height advantage.

"I thought we'd be able to get the ball inside more," said Uthoff. "We had a big height advantage. We weren't able to do that against their zone. They played great. They're a great team."

Jefferson Coach Stu Ordman said he wanted to feed Uthoff near the basket, but the plan failed. "I'm very frustrated we weren't able to do that," he said.

Bohannon tossed in six 3-pointers en route to his career performance. Paige nailed five 3-pointers and reached 30 points on a free throw with nine seconds left.

Paige was averaging 17.4 points when the game began and Bohannon was sitting at 16.2 in a normally balanced attack.

"We usually have pretty deep groups here at Linn-Mar that doesn't require one guy to do it all," said Paige. "It's nice to have the balance we have."

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This time, the Lions needed two guys to do it all. Bohannon and Paige combined for 60 out of 70 points.

"Me and Matt talked a lot before this game and decided we needed to step up," said Paige. "We really tried to take the initiative and pick our guys up by being aggressive early."

In baseball, the 30-30 club describes a player who hits 30 home runs and steals 30 bases. In basketball Tuesday night, it described how Linn-Mar beat Jefferson.

"I wouldn't have guessed Matt and Marcus would both drop 30, but we needed them to," said Robertson.

Ordman thinks he saw a pair of teammates score 30 points in a girls basketball game once, but couldn't remember seeing it in a boys game.

"I'm disappointed they did it against us, but they sure played great," he said.

Linn-Mar arrived at Jefferson with a perfect 19-0 record with two games left in the regular season. The Lions were determined to leave with their 20th straight win.

"I know our guys have pride and I know they're winners," said Robertson. "I knew they would rise to the challenge. I did not know if we'd have enough in the tank, especially inside going against Jarrod.

"It shouldn't surprise me, but yet it does surprise me a little bit," he said. "It was a great performance by the whole team."

Robertson said he's "hopeful" McBrayer and Montague will return to the lineup this season.

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Montague had an MRI this week and was dragging his knee Tuesday night.

Jefferson point guard Taylor Olson returned after missing four games with a back injury and scored six points. Alec Saunders scored 13 points for the J-Hawks (14-5, 10-5) and Tyler Meiborg netted 11.

LINN-MAR (70): Thul 0 0-2 0, Krusie 0 2-2 2, Benton 2 0-0 5, Paige 9 7-10 30, Bohannon 9 6-8 30, Gogg 1 0-2 2, Soyer 0 1-2 1, Lassen 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 16-26 70.

JEFFERSON (64): Hemphill 0 2-2 2, Kramer 2 0-0 6, Olson 2 2-4 6, Saunders 3 7-8 13, Uthoff 9 4-4 26, Meiborg 4 3-6 11, Denny 0 0-0 0. Totals 20 18-24 64.

Halftime -- Linn-Mar 32, Jefferson 29. 3-point goals -- Linn-Mar 12 (Bohannon 6, Paige 5, Benton), Jefferson 6 (Uthoff 4, Kramer 2). Fouled out -- Benton, Gogg, Hemphill.