

## LIONS ARE CHAMPS!!!

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 12 March 2011 23:41 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 March 2011 13:40

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DES MOINES -- Matt Bohannon hugged Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson so hard Saturday night it probably hurt, but that's not why Robertson shed a few tears at Wells Fargo Arena.

They were tears of sheer joy.

Bohannon and Marcus Paige netted 24 points apiece as Linn-Mar completed its perfect season with a 56-42 victory over No.3 Des Moines Hoover in the finals of the Class 4A state tournament.

"It's emotional," said Robertson. "I just love these guys. They're just such great kids, great character, great role models in our community. This is fantastic."

Bohannon was named captain of the Class 4A all-tournament team and also was honored as the MVP of the entire tournament, regardless of a school's size or classification.

"It's a complete team honor," Bohannon declared.

The top-ranked Lions (26-0) claimed the school's third state title in eight years and the fourth overall.

"I'm happy for all of them, but nobody knows how much this means to Matt Bohannon," said Robertson. "Now he can sit at the Thanksgiving table with his brothers and talk about championships. I couldn't be more happy for him."

Jason Bohannon helped Linn-Mar win the 4A title in 2004, then Zach Bohannon helped the Lions claim the state crown in 2007. Matt has something to brag about, too.

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"Now Zach can't give me crap for not having one," he said with a smile. "I'm just kidding."

Bohannon and Paige combined to score 48 of Linn-Mar's 56 points, but it was far from a two-man show. Shane Benton contributed his usual dose of hard-nosed defense, Josh Montague blocked three shots despite playing with a torn MCL in his right knee and Ian McBrayer was a rock near the basket as usual.

The Lions also got solid help off the bench from Michael Thul, Mason Krusie and Derik Gogg to prevent Hoover (23-3) from spoiling their party.

"It couldn't be a sweeter ending and it couldn't have happened to a greater group of guys," said Robertson, in his sixth year as Linn-Mar's head coach. "It's been an outstanding ride and I don't think it will sink in for a few days, but we're sure going to enjoy it tonight."

Free throws made a big difference. Linn-Mar hit 16 of 19, all by Bohannon and Paige, while Hoover was only 5 for 16, costing the Huskies valuable points. Bohannon was 8-for-10 at the line and Paige went 8-for-9.

Bohannon, a 6-foot-4 senior who has signed with the University of Northern Iowa, was also a beast on the boards with nine rebounds. He finished the three-game tournament with 75 points for a neat 25-point average and was crowned the MVP on center stage.

"I don't think it (the MVP award) could have gone to anyone else," said Robertson. "Anybody who knows Matt knows how hard he works and what a competitor he is and how tough he is. Northern Iowa has a good player coming."

Bohannon led all Class 4A players in scoring by a wide margin. Paige finished second with 61 points for a 20.3 mark.

Paige also made the 4A all-tournament team with Onterier Brown (Hoover), Dondre Alexander

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(Iowa City West), Grant Lang (Ankeny), Kelly Madison Jr. (Hoover) and Bohannon, the honorary captain.

Hoover scored the first two baskets for an early 4-0 lead, but Linn-Mar slapped on a full-court zone press that forced a few turnovers and raised the heat. The Huskies prefer a slow pace, but the Lions did not allow it.

"That was part of our game plan," said Paige. "We knew they were a great team, very streaky, athletic, rebounded well."

Linn-Mar scored 14 straight points for a 14-4 lead and never trailed again. Hoover crashed the boards and hit enough shots to climb within six points at 33-27 midway through the third period, but the Lions pulled away from there.

Paige hit a jumper, Benton scored inside and Bohannon nailed a jumper for a 39-27 advantage late in the third quarter. The Huskies drew within eight points at 41-33 early in the final stanza, but that's as close as they got.

Bohannon twice was fouled on 3-point shots in the fourth quarter. He hit all three free throws on his first trip for a 44-33 advantage, then went 2-for-3 on his next trip for a 48-35 margin with 3:34 left in the ballgame.

Paige hit two foul shots with 1:17 left to make it 56-42. The strong contingent of Linn-Mar fans, estimated at more than 2,000 faithful, began their victory chant and Hoover Coach Courtney Henderson instructed his players not to foul.

Robertson called a timeout with 39.5 seconds to get reserves in the game, and that's when Bohannon gave his coach a big bear-hug and wouldn't let go. The hugs and smiles spread from there.

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Bohannon called Robertson "an ultimate player's coach" who deserves credit for keeping the team relaxed all season with a big target on its back as the No.1 squad in the rankings.

The Lions were No.1 from start to finish.

"We stayed focused and kept our eyes on the prize the whole time," said Paige. "It's a great feeling to know we're on top."

Robertson said he had a good feeling all day, knowing he had Paige and Bohannon on his side. "I just didn't think they were going to let us lose tonight," he said.

"Hoover was a very, very good opponent. It took all we had, and it's just very satisfying."

Robertson was an assistant coach at Linn-Mar when the Lions won the state title in 2004. He took over in 2006 and has steered the Lions to state crowns in 2007 and 2011.

Is this the best Linn-Mar team of the bunch? "I'd put them up against anybody," he remarked, a twinkle in his eye.

Best ever?

"In my humble opinion," offered Paige, laughing, "I would have to say so, but I'm a little biased."

The Lions will be honored in a ceremony in the high school gym at 2 p.m. Sunday.

Paige was the only junior in the starting lineup for Linn-Mar this season. Bohannon, Benton,

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Montague and McBrayer all graduate.

"I'm going to miss these guys," said Paige. "They're great, and this is the most fun I've ever had playing basketball."

Paige has committed to North Carolina, but Linn-Mar fans don't have to worry about him skipping his senior year at Linn-Mar in favor of an elite prep school. "I'll definitely be back next year to work on getting back to state," he said.

The Lions set a state record this year with their eighth straight trip to the state tournament. They'll aim for No.9 next season.

"We lose a lot," said Robertson, "but we start with a pretty good one to build around next year."

Brown led Hoover with 14 points. Madison scored 11 points and Reggie White grabbed a game-high 10 rebounds.

Dwight Sistrunk Jr., who missed the semifinals Friday with a concussion, played 31 minutes for the Huskies at point guard and directed their offense, but he shot 0-for-7 from the field and missed both of his free throws.

DES MOINES HOOVER (42): Dwight Sistrunk Jr. 0 0-2 0, Onterier Brown 6 2-7 14, Kourtlin Jackson 2 2-2 8, Kelly Madison Jr. 5 0-1 11, Reggie White 2 1-4 5, Omar Lamar 0 0-0 0, Cedric Danilson 0 0-0 0, Gatlat Toang 2 0-0 4, Shayrohn Belle 0 0-0 0, Loanga Ingoli 0 0-0 0, Chris Bemisdafer 0 0-0 0, Bakr Brown 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 5-16 42.

LINN-MAR (56): Shane Benton 2 0-0 4, Marcus Paige 7 8-9 24, Matt Bohannon 7 8-10 24, Ian McBrayer 1 0-0 2, Josh Montague 0 0-0 0, Michael Thul 0 0-0 0, Nick Soyer 0 0-0 0, Matt Lassen 0 0-0 0, Mason Krusie 0 0-0 0, Nate Johnson 0 0-0 0, Braxton Lancial 0 0-0 0, Derik Gogg 1 0-0 2. Totals 18 16-19 56.

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Halftime - Linn-Mar 28, Hoover 21. 3-point goals - Hoover 3 (Jackson 2, Madison), Linn-Mar 4 (Paige 2, Bohannon 2).