

Lions back to state for 8th straight time

Written by Mike Koolbeck

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North Scott tried a gimmick defense that had some success against Linn-Mar standouts Marcus Paige and Matt Bohannon on Tuesday night in a Class 4A substate tournament at the U.S. Cellular Center.

But it turned out the only way to truly shutout Bohannon was by latching the locker room door.

Bohannon's steal and coast-to-coast layup highlighted a 25-0 Linn-Mar run that carried the top-ranked Lions past North Scott, 50-25, and into the boys state basketball tournament for a record eighth straight year.

The Lions (23-0) earned the top seed in the tournament and will play eighth seeded Cedar Rapids Washington (17-8) next Wednesday (March 9) at 1:45 p.m. The Warriors whipped Dubuque Hempstead, 56-31, in Tuesday's nightcap at the U.S. Cellular Center. Linn-Mar beat Washington twice during the regular season, 80-55 and 62-41.

Linn-Mar will be after its third state title in the last eight years. The Lions started their consecutive tourney appearance streak in 2004, when they won the Class 4A state title. They also won it in 2007. The Lions had been tied with Cedar Rapids Regis for the longest streak of consecutive state tournament appearances. The Royals went seven straight times from 1989-95.

"Eight straight, people might say it gets old," said Bohannon, who scored 10 of his game-high 15 points in the fourth quarter. "But it never gets old. Every time is sweet. For some of us, this is our third time there. I can honestly say that the other two times have been good, but going back there is going to be great."

Paige and Ian McBrayer added 10 points apiece for Linn-Mar. Darren Dillon had 12 points for North Scott (16-7).

Linn-Mar led just 23-22 after North Scott's Dillon knocked down his fourth 3-pointer with 6:02 left

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in the third quarter. The Lancers did not score again until Ben Engler hit a trey with 1:53 left in the game. The Lions scored 25 straight points in the interim.

"I thought we defended well all game," Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson said. "We gave them a few open shots in the first half that they made 3s on, but we didn't give them that many clean looks in the second half."

North Scott employed a triangle-and-two defense that stymied Paige and Bohannon in the first half. The Lancers trailed 22-17 at halftime, but scored only eight points in the second half.

Linn-Mar's lead was only 31-22 into the fourth quarter, but Bohannon's steal and layin and his two 3-pointers finally got the Lions untracked offensively.

"The whole night we were looking for that one thing that was going to put us over the edge," said Bohannon, who was late getting back to the locker room after the game and had to rap on the door with a sheepish smile to gain entry. "It was one of those games that just kept going back-and-forth, back-and-forth at a real slow pace. We needed something to get us going and I think that kind of ignited something."

"That was the turning point of the game," Paige said.

"We just needed that spurt," Robertson said. "We needed something to give us a little bit of breathing room."

Once the Lions got the scent of blood, it was all over for the Lancers, who made only 3 of 18 shots in the second half.

"Our league doesn't have these elite players like this," said North Scott Coach Shamus Budde, whose team plays in the Mississippi Athletic Conference. "You got to give Linn-Mar credit. They made plays and we had a hard time putting it in the hole in the second half."

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Robertson said that he hasn't made a big deal about going back to the state tournament for an eighth straight year, but admitted he thought he was more nervous than the players heading into the game.

"The hardest part for me is that I hear all the talk about the people that make hotel reservations, and the state tournament shirts are ready and all that stuff that you try to put in the back of your head and just go play basketball," Robertson said. "You get a little tense because you want the best for the kids. I'm just happy for them."

After seven straight trips, the Lions have standing hotel reservations in Des Moines.

"The reservations for the team always get made at the beginning of the year," Robertson said. "But you hear people talking and saying, 'Oh, we got rooms. We got rooms,' and you just want to say 'Hold on there.'"

"I'm just happy. It's a great group of seniors and this will be a lot of fun for them."

That list of senior players will increase by one next week. After missing most of the last month with a knee injury, Josh Montague has been given the clearance to start practicing this weekend. The 6-foot-7 pivot will add to the Lions' inside strength.

Five teams from the Mississippi Valley Conference will play in the state tournament. Joining Linn-Mar and Washington are Jefferson and Iowa City West in Class 4A and Dubuque Wahlert has qualified in Class 3A.

The Metro area qualified four teams. Marion will play in the Class 3A tournament.

NORTH SCOTT (25): Brandon Voss 1 1-2 3, Ben Engler 1 0-0 3, Aaron Huber 1 2-2 4, Travis

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Anderson 0 1-2 1, Jordan Arp 0 0-0 0, Darren Dillon 4 0-0 12, Eric Huber 0 2-2 2, Noah Gompert 0 0-1 0, Archie Britcher 0 0-0 0, Jon Daters 0 0-0 0, Alex Hintz 0 0-0 0, Dylan Michel 0 0-0 0. Totals 7 6-9 25.

LINN-MAR (50): Michael Thul 1 2-2 4, Shane Benton 2 2-2 6, Marcus Paige 3 3-4 10, Matt Bohannon 5 3-4 15, Ian McBrayer 5 0-0 10, Dirk Gogg 0 1-2 1, Mason Krusie 2 0-0 4, Nick Soyer 0 0-0 0, Matt Lassen 0 0-1 0, Nick Gentzler 0 0-0 0, Braxton Lancial 0 0-0 0. Totals 18 11-15 50.

Halftime -- Linn-Mar 22, North Scott 17. 3-point goals -- North Scott 5 (Dillon 4, Engler), Linn-Mar 3 (Bohannon 2, Paige).