

Paige, Bohannon lead Lions into title tilt

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES -- Marcus Paige and Matt Bohannon were impressionable middle schoolers when Linn-Mar won the Class 4A state basketball title in 2007 for the second time in four years.

Now wily upper classmen, they'll have a chance to cement Linn-Mar's place in state history Saturday night when they play for the 2011 championship at Wells Fargo Arena.

Another title would give Linn-Mar three state crowns in eight years, the stuff of dynasties.

Paige scored 23 points Friday afternoon and Bohannon netted 19 as the top-ranked Lions handled No.4 Iowa City West, 63-48, in the topsy-turvy semifinals.

Linn-Mar will put its perfect 25-0 record on the line against No.3 Des Moines Hoover (23-2) Saturday night at 8:05 for the title.

The Lions appeared to bury Iowa City West with a 20-0 streak during the final six minutes of the second quarter, turning a 12-12 nailbiter into a 32-12 bulge at halftime. It looked like it was time to polish the state championship trophy right there.

The streak reached 23 points when Bohannon hit a 3-pointer to start the second half, making it 35-12. The lead grew to 27 points at 42-15, but the Lions tapered off, the Trojans got hot and it turned into a competitive game again.

"We relaxed a little bit," said Bohannon. "We took our foot off the pedal a little bit and kind of rushed a few shots.

"We just had to calm down," he said. "We've been down this road before."

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Iowa City West (20-5) chopped the lead all the way down to just eight points, 50-42, with 3:24 left in the ballgame with an impressive 27-8 run of its own. Suddenly, Linn-Mar's date with destiny appeared to be in doubt.

"We just didn't play real smart," said Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson.

That's when Paige took over.

Paige made a quick burst to the basket for a soft layup, making it 52-42. Iowa City West countered with two free throws, but Paige hit a pullup jumper to make it 54-44.

Iowa City West scored again, but this time Paige slipped a clever pass to Josh Montague for a layup and a 56-46 advantage with just 1:34 remaining to lift Linn-Mar out of danger.

"I kind of had a sense of urgency at the end of the game," said Paige, a 6-foot-1 junior who has committed to North Carolina. "I needed to step up and attack a little bit more and calm the rest of my teammates down."

Mission accomplished.

"At that point I could kind of see he was going to take over the game a little bit down the stretch," said Robertson, who has seen Paige perform heroics like that before.

"He wasn't going to let us lose," said Bohannon.

Bohannon made a free throw with 1:07 left for a 57-46 lead, but his second foul shot was nullified by a lane violation by one of his teammates. Iowa City West missed a 3-pointer, then Shane Benton hit two foul shots with 42.5 seconds remaining to give Linn-Mar a 59-46

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advantage and seal the deal.

Linn-Mar's 20-0 streak in the first half showed the Lions at their very best. The game was tied, 12-12, early in the second quarter when Linn-Mar nearly blew Iowa City West out of Des Moines. Ian McBrayer started the 20-0 surge with a 3-pointer and another basket, then Paige scored nine straight points himself.

"That's what they do," said Iowa City West Coach Steve Bergman. "That's whatever their record is ... I know there's an 'O' at the end for a reason. We knew we had to play pretty clean and we certainly didn't do that in the second quarter."

It went from 12-12 to 32-12 in a flash. Gamely, Bergman talked about a comeback at halftime.

"There weren't a lot of X's and O's to talk about," he said. "We just couldn't throw them the ball every other possession."

Robertson called a timeout in the middle of the third quarter after the Lions strayed from their game plan, launching quick 3-pointers with a big lead instead of passing the ball for a good shot. He ripped into his players during the timeout, but momentum had switched and it didn't stop until Paige took command in the final minutes.

Jeremy Morgan hit three 3-pointers and scored 13 points to spark Iowa City West's comeback. Dondre Alexander and Jake Gylten scored 10 apiece for the Trojans and Austin Swank netted eight, and they all played a big role in the rally.

Montague finished with 10 points for Linn-Mar, including a dunk with 12 seconds left to end the scoring.

Linn-Mar reached the state tournament for the eighth straight time this season, a state record, and has reached the championship game for the fifth time during that stretch. The Lions won

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titles in 2004 and 2007; they placed second in 2005 and 2009.

The Lions have been working toward Saturday night's championship game ever since they assembled for the first day of practice in November.

"It's what we wanted," said Bohannon. "It's what we've worked so hard for. We knew we wanted to be here."

"A lot of guys expected to be right where we are today," said Paige. "We didn't expect anything to come to us without working for it, every day and every game. We've been grinding out victories and hopefully we can get one more."

Linn-Mar beat Iowa City West by 24 points, 67-43, in a Mississippi Valley Conference game in December. The Lions have been equally impressive on the tournament trail, winning their four tournament games by 24, 25, 17 and 15 points.

Des Moines Hoover nipped Ankeny, 49-47, in the other semifinal Friday on a basket by Kelly Madison Jr. with 1.8 seconds left.

IOWA CITY WEST (48): Dondre Alexander 3 3-5 10, Jeremy Morgan 5 0-0 13, Wyatt Lohaus 0 0-0 0, Jake Gylten 4 2-2 10, Okechukwu Ukah 2 1-4 5, Leo Franz 0 0-0 0, Austin Swank 2 2-2 8, John Seyfer 0 0-0 0, Corey Staten 1 0-0 2. Totals 17 8-13 48.

LINN-MAR (63): Shane Benton 0 2-2 2, Marcus Paige 8 6-7 23, Matt Bohannon 6 5-6 19, Ian McBrayer 3 0-0 7, Josh Montague 4 2-2 10, Michael Thul 0 0-0 0, Mason Krusie 0 0-0 0, Derik Gogg 1 0-0 2. Totals 22 15-19 63.

Halftime -- Linn-Mar 32, Iowa City West 12. 3-point goals -- Iowa City West 6 (Morgan 3, Swank 2, Alexander), Linn-Mar 4 (Bohannon 2, Paige, McBrayer).