

Lions face stingy Hoover for title

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES -- The Linn-Mar Lions will face one of the stingiest high school basketball teams in Iowa Saturday night when they meet Des Moines Hoover in the finals of the Class 4A state tournament.

Tipoff at Wells Fargo Arena is scheduled for 8:05 p.m.

Hoover (23-2) allowed an average of just 35.6 points per game during the regular season and prides itself on defense. Linn-Mar, meanwhile, has two of the top weapons in the state tournament and averages a healthy 69.2 points for the campaign.

Matt Bohannon has averaged 25.5 points in Linn-Mar's victories in the first two rounds of the state tournament and Marcus Paige has been producing 18.5 points, making them Target A and Target B for the Huskies in the finals.

"We look forward to the challenge," Hoover Coach Courtney Henderson said Friday. "They have a heck of a ballclub, they have a heck of a tradition. They're one of the best programs in the state."

Linn-Mar (25-0) is seeking its third state title in eight years, but points could be hard to come by. Hoover held nine teams to under 30 points this season, including just 18 by Des Moines Lincoln.

"I think they're very good defensively," Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson said. "They're good on the ball, they get in the gaps, they take charges. It will be a challenge. Hopefully we'll be able to figure out some holes in there."

The top-ranked Lions advanced to the finals with a 71-54 victory over Cedar Rapids Washington in the quarterfinals and a 63-48 conquest of Iowa City West in the semifinals, erasing two familiar foes from the Mississippi Valley Conference. Now the Lions will face a stranger from the CIML.

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The third-ranked Huskies advanced with a 45-39 verdict over Cedar Rapids Jefferson in the quarterfinals and a 49-47 victory over Ankeny in the semifinals. The Huskies held Jefferson to 16 points in the first three quarters Wednesday before the J-Hawks scored 23 points in the fourth period.

Hoover point guard Dwight Sistrunk Jr. scored eight points against Jefferson in the quarterfinals, but he suffered a concussion in practice following that game and did not play in the semifinals against Ankeny on Friday. He is questionable for the championship game against Linn-Mar, pending a doctor's appointment.

Sistrunk, the son of a former Iowa football player, leads Hoover in assists and was an all-CIML second-team selection this season, averaging 8.9 points.

Reggie White, Hoover's 6-foot-6 center, was suspended for the first semester this season after being charged with assault causing bodily injury last summer. His trial is scheduled for later this month, according to court records cited by the Des Moines Register. He missed the first seven games of the season and did not play until Jan. 4.

Linn-Mar has won state titles in 1983, 2004 and 2007. If the Lions win their fourth crown tonight, they'll tie for the eighth-most championships in state history. Davenport Central is the all-time leader with nine titles, followed by Ames with eight.

Linn-Mar played in the state finals in 2009 when Bohannon was a sophomore and Paige a freshman. They lost that championship game to Ames, 55-45, but they think the experience will help them against Hoover.

"It's the biggest game of our lives so far," said Bohannon. "We want to come out ready to play."

"We can let our guys know what it's like, tell them we were there, we had the same butterflies they're going to have," said Paige. "It should be pretty exciting and nerve-wracking for us, too."

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Hoover Coach Henderson knows his team has to keep Paige under control in the finals.

"He's one of the best point guards in the country," said Henderson. "We know we're going to have our hands full."

Kelly Madison Jr. leads the Huskies at 12.0 points and has averaged 17.0 points in the state tournament. All five starters average between 7.4 and 12 points per game, assuming Sistrunk can play.