

No.8 Lions fall at No.6 SE Polk

Written by Bill Seals

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RUNNELLS - Linn-Mar took the fight to a postseason-savvy Southeast Polk squad on its home court Tuesday night in a Class 5A regional final, but the Rams hung around and later used a 9-0 fourth-quarter run to pull away for a 56-45 victory.

It wasn't the storybook ending the Lions were looking for, but Coach Jaime Printy Brandt's first team drew perhaps the most difficult matchup of any of the 5A regional finalists.

Linn-Mar was tasked with a charter bus trip to Runnels on a weeknight to face a Southeast Polk team that's played in the past two state championship games and won the title in 2013.

"They just hit some big shots," said Brandt, who led the eighth-ranked Lions to a 16-8 record in her first season as head coach. "We lost a shooter a couple times, but credit to them, they came out and played well and shot the ball very well. That's what they do."

The Lions set the early tone by scoring 10 of the game's first 12 points over the first 5:57 of the first quarter behind a pair of buckets from Olivia Montaque. Following the quick start, Linn-Mar grabbed a 16-8 lead after the opening period.

However, Southeast Polk's outside shooting would stem the tide and a pair of 3-pointers by Sierra Mitchell in the second period got the home team back in it. Mitchell added two more 3-pointers the rest of the way to finish with 16 points.

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“We were playing extremely well, knocking down shots and moving the ball really well,” Brandt said. “But we knew we were on the road and that they were a great team, so that they would make a run. They made a run right back at us.”

While the Rams found their outside stroke on the offensive end, they identified Montaque and Amanda Ollinger on the defensive end and put the clamps on Linn-Mar’s top two threats. Ollinger, a University of Iowa, finished with a team-high 14 points and 12 rebounds. Montaque was held in check for the most part after the first period and posted eight in her final high school game.

“They just put a lot of different looks on us to try to make us think and turn the ball over a couple extra times,” said Ollinger. “They play phenomenal defense. When we switch up defenses like that, it’s always hard to think while you’re out there on the fly. They played great.”

After clinging to a 24-21 lead heading into the locker room, the Lions trailed by a 36-34 margin going into the fourth period. That’s when the veteran Southeast Polk squad kicked it into high gear in front of the home faithful.

The Rams scored the first nine points of the fourth period to take an 11-point lead before Linn-Mar finally answered with a pair of Ollinger free throws with 3:57 left to play. By then, it was too late and the host team was on the way back to Wells Fargo Arena for the state tournament.

Southeast Polk (17-6) will face Iowa City West (21-2) in the first round Wednesday.

“It was really tough going in here and the intensity was thick in the air,” Ollinger said. “You can tell. Their crowd is phenomenal and they really get into it. That’s what you want, is to give it your all against a team on their home court.”

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"We came out confident and knew if we played our game that good things would come. We didn't hit our shots tonight and it happens. You can't shoot well every night and sometimes you have some crucial turnovers down the stretch. Everyone fought so hard."

While the Lions are headed home one game shy of the state tournament, the tone has been set for how Brandt's teams will play in the coming seasons.

"It's been amazing," she said. "This group of girls – I couldn't have asked for a better group. They came in and they worked hard every single day for me. They got along off the court and are good kids."

"It's definitely been a learning experience for me, as far as the X's and O's and being a coach instead of a player. But it's been all that I could have asked for and I'm glad Linn-Mar wanted me here."

"We had a better year than people thought or expected us to. I think our seniors did a great job leading this year and we had a couple young ones in a sophomore and strong junior class. I have no doubt in my mind that they'll come back and work hard all off-season."

Senior post Nikita Sharma also played in her final high school game and contributed 12 points.

LINN-MAR (45): Murphy 1 0-0 3, Montaque 4 0-0 11, Sharma 5 1-2 12, Finley 1 1-2 3, Larson 1 0-1 2, Ollinger 5 3-4 14. Totals 17 5-9 45.

SOUTHEAST POLK (56): Uhl 3 2-2 8, Mitchell 4 4-4 16, Donels 3 3-6 11, Stuart 5 2-4 13, Huinker 3 0-0 6, Penquite 0 2-2 2. Totals 18 13-18 56

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Halftime – Linn-Mar 24, Southeast Polk 21, 3-point goals – Linn-Mar 7 (Montaque 3, Ollinger 1, Sharma 1, Murphy 1), Southeast Polk 7 (Mitchell

4, Donels 2, Stuart 1).