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Frantic rally falls one basket short as Grafton girls see their Cinderella season end in regional title game

Something had to give.

When the Grafton and Waupun girls' basketball teams took the court for a WIAA Division 2 regional title game last Saturday, each side brought with it a loud wave of support and a long winning streak.

But when the final horn sounded, visiting Waupun and its fans were the only ones celebrating — the perk of a 54-52 victory that could have gone the other way.

Fighting back from a six-point deficit with less than one minute to play, Grafton nearly pulled off a miracle comeback.

It wasn't until Hannah Eichler's shot in the lane in the final seconds bounced off that Waupun escaped — and the Black Hawks were left with season-ending heartbreak.

"It was a very tough loss. We had our chances, so many of them, but the ball just didn't bounce our way," said Grafton coach Bob Maronde, whose team had its 13-game winning streak snapped.

"Waupun has a very good team, but we battled well. I was very pleased with our effort."

Not surprisingly, the game became a tussle between two of the regional's highest-seeded teams. Waupun (No. 3) needed a near-flawless performance from guard Morgan Domask to edge the Hawks (No. 2), extend its winning streak to 10 games and advance to the regional title contest Saturday.

Domask, a senior guard, scored a game-high 21 points without missing a shot. She made all four of her field-goal attempts, including a trio of three-pointers, and was 10-for-10 at the free-throw line.

Domask had 16 points in the second half when the Warriors survived a roller-coaster exchange in which both teams struggled to protect leads.

Trailing, 23-20, at halftime, Grafton rallied to take a five-point lead in the third quarter. However, Waupun fought back to regain a 38-36 edge entering the final period.

Domask led a fourth-quarter run by the Warriors, who carried a 54-48 lead into the closing minute. With 47 seconds left, Grafton was forced to foul.

The strategy nearly paid off when the Hawks scored two baskets and Waupun cooperated by missing free throws. On the Warriors' final miss with 7.5 seconds left, Eichler grabbed the rebound and raced downcourt.

She beat a defender, but her close-range attempt failed to drop. While the Warriors erupted in celebration, the Hawks and their faithful were left to ponder a comeback that narrowly missed.

It was a tough end to a season and career for Eichler, whose stellar play was the chief reason Grafton made a remarkable run in the second half of the season. The senior guard scored 19 points, including a 7-for-9 effort at the foul line.

"Hannah was outstanding and so were our other players," Maronde said.

"We did everything we could to win, but it wasn't meant to be. In the final minute, I was amazed at how well the girls executed during the comeback."

Grafton, which finished the season 19-5, had only six players score, but each contributed key baskets. Besides Eichler's leadership, the Hawks got 10 points from forward Kim Schacht and eight from guard Haley Orlowski.

Domask was the headliner for Waupun, which improved to 21-3 and advanced to a sectional semifinal game against top-seeded Beaver Dam this weekend. The Warriors also got 19 points from another senior guard, Katie Hansen.

"Domask and Hansen are both excellent guards who handle the ball well and shoot very well," Maronde said. "You have to give them credit for the way they played."

Maronde also wasted no time giving his own team credit for a season in which they regrouped in January and went two months without losing. The streak culminated in a North Shore Conference co-championship with Nicolet and Whitefish Bay — teams Grafton defeated during its run.

“This was a very special group,” Maronde said. “They pulled together and proved a lot of people wrong.

“I told them after the game that every time they come back to the gym, they can look up on the wall and see a sign that says they were conference champions.”

Saturday’s game was the final one in a Grafton basketball uniform for seniors Eichler, Schacht and Tess Safstrom.

Image Information: A SEASON-ENDING DEFEAT became a harsh reality for Grafton players — including (from left) Amanda Hunt, Haley Orlowski and Hannah Eichler — following Saturday’s 54-52 loss to Waupun. Photo by Sam Arendt