

Do you believe in Black Hawk magic?

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Never-say-die Grafton boys embrace underdog role on way to eye-opening regional title

Tournament championships in boys' basketball have been a rare commodity at Grafton High School the past few years.

Make that during the current millennium.



Ending an 19-year drought, the Black Hawks stormed their way to a WIAA Division 2 regional title last Saturday by upsetting host Waupun, 56-51.

After taking a 10-point lead into halftime, Grafton shook off a shaky third quarter to secure the crown — their first in boys' hoops since 1994.

"It's really amazing. Our guys are playing with a lot of confidence," said Hawks coach Bob Maronde, whose team continued a late-season roll by notching its fourth straight win.

"Right now, they're believing that they can beat any team anywhere."

After last weekend, Grafton has good reason to buy into that credo. The sixth-seeded Hawks opened some eyes by defeating No. 3 Nicolet in a quarterfinal game Friday to set the stage for a bigger road win the next night.

Second-seeded Waupun (18-6) entered the title game as a solid favorite against a Hawks team that was only 8-14 during the regular season.

But Grafton showed it meant business by forcing the Warriors into turnovers on their first three possessions. Senior forward Scotty Tyler's six points helped the Hawks build a 13-8 lead by the

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end of the opening quarter.

Junior Caleb Keshenberg continued the surge with 10 points in the second period, including a pair of three-point baskets. The margin grew to 32-22 by halftime.

“We came out and played really, really well,” Maronde said. “It started with our defense. We thought that pressing them might cause some problems because we hadn’t seen many teams doing that against them.

“We forced some turnovers that got us going.”

Guard Mason Domask kept Waupun close with a one-man scoring show. After scoring 10 of his game-high 25 points in the first half, the sophomore added eight in the third period.

Domask’s heroics helped the Warriors rally to take a brief one-point lead early in the second half. Struggling against Waupun’s diamond-and-one defense, Grafton was outscored, 13-5, in the third quarter.

But the Hawks reasserted themselves with patient offense. After holding the ball for 35 seconds, Grafton regained the lead on a three-point basket by Mitchell Kurz and never trailed again.

In the fourth quarter, free-throw success helped the Hawks preserve the lead. Keshenberg, who scored a team-high 22 points, was 5-for-6 at the line in the final period, and Tyler was 3-for-6.

Tyler finished with 15 points.

“It was a great win. Our defense really set the tone for us,” Maronde said.

“Domask scored a lot of points, but he had to take a lot of shots to do it. We put Choo Weisflog on him, and he made him work for everything.”

The Warriors’ next two best players, forwards Brant Nickel and Cody Zimmerman, combined for just 11 points in the face of Grafton’s front-line defense.

The win sent the Hawks into sectional play for the first time since the 1993-94 season. That was also the last season in which they reached a state tournament.

On Friday, they will face top-seeded Slinger in a 7 p.m. sectional semifinal at Sheboygan South High School. The teams met early this season, with Slinger winning, 50-47, on Nov. 24.

Friday’s winner will face the winner of a semifinal between Pulaski and Seymour for the sectional title at 2:30 p.m. Saturday in Fond du Lac.

“It’s exciting. The kids are playing so well right now and having a ball,” said Maronde, who has overseen the turnaround of a long-struggling boys’ team after a successful run with a girls’

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program that won two state titles.

“Change is not easy for anyone, players or coaches. But a lot of credit goes to these guys for buying into a new system.

“And they have really bought into it.”

Grafton 56, Nicolet 50

The third time was certainly the charm for the Hawks, who avenged two North Shore Conference losses with a regional road win.

After trailing, 19-17, at the end of the first quarter, Grafton controlled the next two periods and built a 47-37 lead.

Although the Knights stayed within striking distance in the fourth quarter, they never got closer than five points.

A pair of free throws by Beau Benzschawel in the final minute gave Grafton a 54-47 lead and helped seal the victory.

“We didn’t back down. We did everything we had to to win,” said Maronde, who cited his team’s ability to handle Nicolet’s pressure defense as a key.

Tyler led the Hawks with 17 points, and Benzschawel added 16.

Tyler Miller’s 15 points led Nicolet, which also got 13 from Eugene Bonner and 11 from Greg Pigg.

Nicolet won the team’ two previous meetings this season handily, 58-41 and 66-48.

Image Information: COACH BOB MARONDE has led the sideline charge for a Grafton boys’ basketball team that has shown improvement throughout the season. Last Saturday, the Black Hawks’ late-season surge continued when they upset second-seeded Waupun to win a WIAA

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Division 2 regional title and advance to the sectional level for the first time since 1994.

Photo by Sam Arendt