

One step shy of a state ticket

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Grafton boys' frenzied postseason run ends in grip of hard-pressing, hot-shooting Pulaski basketball team

One step away from booking its first trip to a WIAA state tournament in 19 years, the Grafton boys' basketball team stumbled a bit last Saturday afternoon.

It wasn't a matter of the Black Hawks stumbling on their own, though.



It took Pulaski, a formidable foe armed with harassing defense and a sharp-shooting star, to end Grafton's improbable postseason run.

"We had trouble handling their defense. We were a little short at the guard position," said Hawks coach Bob Maronde, whose team bowed, 53-37, in a Division 2 sectional title game at Fond du Lac High School.

"Pulaski shot the ball very well and put us in a hole early. It was tough to come back against a team that played that well."

The top-seeded Red Raiders, fresh off a sectional-semifinal win over Seymour, wasted no time turning up the heat on fifth-seeded Grafton in the battle for a state berth.

After Scott Tyler's three-pointer gave the Hawks a 3-0 lead, Pulaski went on an 11-0 run and never looked back. Senior forward Cody Wichmann scored seven of his game-high 29 points during the surge, which was sparked by a 1-3-1 half-court trap that forced four Grafton turnovers in the first period.

The Hawks stayed within striking distance in the second quarter, cutting the deficit to 17-11 on a pair of Tyler free throws with four minutes left.

But Pulaski used a long-range shooting salvo to maintain control. The Raiders hit four

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three-pointers in the second period, including two by Wichmann and a buzzer-beater by Jacob Bader that gave them a 26-15 lead at halftime.

Grafton stayed within 37-26 after three periods, but Pulaski sealed the deal with an 8-2 run to start the fourth quarter. Luke VanLanen's driving layup put the Raiders up, 45-29, with 3:20 left.

"That's a very good basketball team we lost to," Maronde said. "They're very quick, they handle the ball well and they made all the big shots.

"We're not quite there yet."

Pulaski, which earned its first state berth since 1989, improved to 21-4.

Wichmann did most of the scoring for the Raiders, but they also got 11 from VanLanen, including nine in the second half.

Tyler, a 6-foot-7 senior forward, capped his senior season with a team-best 16 points. Beau Benzschawel, a junior center, added eight points, but no other Hawk had more than six.

Although Grafton (11-15) stayed in contention most of the way, it was unable to make a serious run in the second half.

"We didn't get that surge we needed," Maronde said. "We had to play a bit smarter and tougher to stay with them."

The game was the final one in a Grafton uniform for seven players — Tyler, Keshemberg, Mitchell Kurz, Jake Wilde, D.J. Gollwitzer, Tony Miller and Mike Konicek. Despite a heart-breaking end to the season, the loss didn't tarnish a late-season run in which the senior-led Hawks won six of their last eight games.

Catching fire in the tournament, Grafton scored upset victories over Nicolet, Waupun and Slinger. With each win, the enthusiasm grew for a team led by a first-year coach who traded his longtime job as head of the Grafton girls' team for a chance to resurrect a struggling program.

Just two years ago, the Hawks finished 6-17 and were happy to snap a 60-game North Shore Conference losing streak. After going 8-15 last season, they struggled with a new system under Maronde and were only 5-13 before things began clicking.

"No one expected us to get here. We were 3-9 at one point before our kids started understanding what we were doing," Maronde said. "There was a big learning curve. The guys deserve a lot of credit for sticking with it and working hard."

One of the biggest believers is Tyler, a four-year varsity player headed to Idaho State this fall on a basketball scholarship.

"I guess it is a Cinderella story," Tyler said after the Hawks defeated Slinger in a sectional

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semifinal last Thursday.

“Everyone kept expecting us to lose, so it’s nice to prove them wrong. I think we just got sick of losing all the time.”

Image Information: CALEB KESHEMBERG (above) and his Grafton teammates saw their tournament dream end with a loss to a ball-hawking Pulaski team in a sectional-title game Saturday. At right, head coach Bob Maronde and the Grafton bench were left to wonder what might have been as the final seconds ticked away. Photos by Sam Arendt