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Panther girls' season ends on sour note

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Beating a team three times in a season is a tentative proposition at best. The O'Fallon High girls' basketball team found themselves facing that challenge on Tuesday night in the Panther Dome when they faced off against the Belleville West Maroons in regional semifinal action.

For three and a half quarters, it appeared that the Panther girls were going to pull off that minor miracle; however, results are determined by 32 minutes of action, not 29. The final three minutes became the nightmarish finale of the 2010-11 season for the local cagers as they suffered a meltdown that evaporated their double-digit fourth quarter lead and ended with them on the short end of a 55-50 score.

Belleville West scored the final 18 points of the game to pull victory from the jaws of defeat while the Panther girls were forced to stare at the scoreboard above the court stunned at the final tally and wondering just what had happened.

Having defeated East St. Louis in their final regular season game, Coach Ryan Massey's charged appearance to be on the high road to success as they entered IHSA tournament play, and the first three quarters of Tuesday night's game seemed to confirm that.

Katie Roustio scored the first basket of the contest with a short jumper in the lane. West countered with a couple of baskets to take a 5-2 lead.

It would be the only advantage the Maroons would enjoy until the 1:13 mark of the fourth quarter. Back-to-back 3-pointers by Kaitlin Kendall and Kendall Butler propelled the Panthers back into the lead — an advantage they extended in the remaining minutes of the initial stanza with a solid offensive attack. Sabre Flager nailed two free throw attempts, and Taylor Underwood came off the bench to make an immediate contribution with two baskets in the paint.

Leading 16-14 after one period of play, O'Fallon continued to apply the pressure while handling Belleville West's attempts to speed up the tempo of the game. An early three-point basket by West's Erica McCaster was answered with consecutive hoops by Roustio and Kendall. Underwood added two more hoops with strong offensive rebounding to extend the Panther lead to five points with under a minute remaining in the half.

Hoping to make it to intermission with no more damage done, the Maroons held the ball for the final shot, but Sabre Flager intercepted an errant pass and streaked to the opposite end of the floor, converting on a lay-up to give O'Fallon a 33-26 halftime lead.

Neither team emerged from the locker room after the intermission with hot hands. Trading infrequent baskets through the first half of the third period, O'Fallon was able to maintain their lead; however, the winds of change began subtly blowing when the Maroons switched defenses.

After having played a conservative 2-3 zone for most of the first half, Belleville West began to extend their defense to half court. The additional pressure seemed to rattle the Panthers as they committed two successive turnovers in the final minute of the period, both of which Belleville West converted into buckets.

Another steal by McCaster on the final play of the quarter resulted in the senior sharpshooter, who had been held in check successfully by O'Fallon to this point in the game, hitting on two of three foul shots, narrowing O'Fallon's lead to 41-36.

The O'Fallon girls initially responded to the challenge with determination and success. Taylor Klingelhoefler banged in a three-point basket from the deep corner — her first points of the game.

Katie Roustio added a baseline jumper on the Panthers' next possession, and when Taylor Underwood converted two free throw attempts the next time down the floor, the O'Fallon girls appeared to have survived the challenge, extending their lead once again to double digits 48-36 with 5:41 remaining in the contest.

A driving layup by Klingelhoefler less than a minute later gave O'Fallon a 13-point bulge; however, it would be the last basket that the Panther girls would score during the season.

A 3-point basket and a layup by McCaster sliced into the O'Fallon lead. It was only the beginning of a nightmarish sequence of events for the Panthers.

The half-court pressure began to take its toll on O'Fallon. With the score 5-42 with 3:23 remaining, the Panthers threw the ball away on four straight possessions — all four of which Belleville West converted into points. Most of the damage was done by McCaster, who popped in consecutive 3-pointers during the sequence.

The second bomb gave Belleville West their first lead since the first minute of the game, 51-50 with 1:17 on the scoreboard clock. The Maroons intercepted another errant toss by O'Fallon after retaking the lead. They capitalized on this error with two free throws.

O'Fallon finally got a shot off when Roustio attempted a jumper in the lane, but the ball banged off the rim. The Panthers retained possession when the ball skipped out of bounds, but the ball was thrown away on the entry pass, sealing the Panthers' fate.

McCaster completed the miracle comeback with two free throws, forcing O'Fallon to the locker room on the short end of a 55-50 score.

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