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Panther girls find their groove

Score consecutive wins over East, West

By Steve Oliver - Progress Sports Writer

It took the better part of three weeks at the start of the season, but the O'Fallon High girls' basketball team apparently has found their groove.

After suffering a couple of second half meltdowns in their first court appearances in 2011-12, Coach Ryan Massey's squad reversed the trend this past week with consecutive SWC victories over Belleville East and Belleville West.

Playing in the curtain-raiser in double-headers with the varsity boys' team against both Belleville schools seemed to elevate the Lady Panthers' game as they rolled to victory in both contests in impressive fashion, showing no signs of the difficulties that had plagued them down the stretch in losses to Chatham-Glenwood and Collinsville.



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"It was good to see our girls respond to the pressure when challenged," Massey said. "We did not finish well in the first couple of weeks, but we have veteran players on this squad, so I anticipate us getting better in that department.

"We had good efforts from all of our players in the last two games. They stepped up and executed much better offensively and stepped to the line and hit free throws down the stretch. If we continue to handle pressure much more efficiently, we'll be OK."

Senior Kaitlin Kendall sparked the victory with a team high 20 points,

including a run of 12 straight points in the second half. Taylor Klingelhofer added 14, the second game in a row that the twosome has provided a potent one-two punch offensively.

Belleville West began the game with crisper execution which resulted in a 16-11 Maroon lead after the first eight minutes of play.

That trend changed abruptly in the second period when the Panther girls turned up the heat defensively, forcing multiple Belleville West turnovers which were converted into points.

Out-scoring their hosts 14-8 during the frame, the O'Fallon squad squeezed into a 1-point lead by the halftime break, 25-24.

Kendall caught fire in the second half and the Panthers rode her hot shooting into a double-digit lead. A run of 11 straight points in the final three minutes of the third stanza was the jolt the Panthers needed to put the game safely in the win column.

A rash of Belleville West turnovers aided the OTHS run as the O'Fallon girls out-scored the Maroons 34-17 over the final two periods to improve to 4-2 overall and 4-1 in SWC play.

The frustration of relinquishing first half leads faded away last Friday night as the OTHS girls put together four solid quarters and put on a show from the free throw line down the stretch to defeat the Belleville East Lancers 72-59.

In a season marked by sporadic play through the first four weeks, Coach Ryan Massey's squad didn't experience a glitch in rolling to the impressive win. Taylor Klingelhofer and Kaitlin Kendall supplied a potent one-two scoring punch, accounting for 49 of O'Fallon's 72 points.

With top post player Katie Roustio on the sideline during most of the first quarter, the OTHS girls relied on slashing drives to the basket from Klingelhofer and Cierra Jones to keep pace with the Lancers. O'Fallon opted to start the game in a 2-3 zone, and the Lancers seemed perplexed in attempting to attack it.

The result was positive as Belleville East was not able to assert themselves on the

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offensive glass, and the Panthers capitalized on several end-to-end scoring opportunities.

A steal by Jones and a pinpoint pass to Klingelhoef, and a second penetration move by Jones gave O'Fallon an advantage with under a minute to go in the first stanza.

Belleville East countered with a 3-point basket at the buzzer to knot the score at 16-16.

Undaunted by the final second bomb, the Panther girls went on a tear of their own during the second period.

Back-to-back 3-point baskets by Klingelhoef from the top of the key and Kendall off the left wing ignited a 17-point scoring spree for O'Fallon.

Kendall's long range basket came off a penetration move by Klingelhoef, who then kicked the ball out to Kendall lurking just past the arc. The play became a staple for O'Fallon during the remainder of the game — with the two OTHS teammates clicking on the option four more times.

Staked to a 33-25 halftime lead, the Panther girls found themselves in familiar territory with an advantage at the mid-way point of a game. The specters of Chatham-Glenwood and Collinsville were still fresh in the squad's minds, however, games that saw early leads evaporate.

In the third period, it appeared that it might turn into déjà vu all over again as Belleville East pounded the boards relentlessly, resulting in multiple shot opportunities every time down the floor.

On consecutive possessions in the final minute of the period, the Lancers snared multiple offensive rebounds which eventually were turned into points. The final Belleville East hoop was a dagger — a 3-point basket at the buzzer to cut the OTHS lead to just three, 45-42.

Taylor Klingelhoef, who led the Panthers with 25 points, set the tone for the final quarter on the first play. Diving on the floor for a loose ball, the Panther guard saved the possession which resulted in a converted free throw by Katie Roustio.

The single point helped O'Fallon maintain a lead as Belleville East drained a 3-pointer on their next possession to cut the OTHS advantage to just one, 46-45. Two clutch free throws by Ciara Jones and a 3-point basket by Kaitlin Kendall that rattled in preserved O'Fallon's lead.

The O'Fallon girls didn't falter with the game on the line. After increasing their lead to six, they began a march to the free throw line in the final four minutes.

The Lancer tactic of fouling did not work as the OTHS squad converted on 18 of 19 free throws to put more distance between themselves and Belleville East.

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