

Lourdes boys on to state after thrilling win

By Brad Hartmann
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His name is Hayden Jones; his teammates refer to him as Jonesey. You might as well call him Mr. Oshkosh as Jones delivered the biggest block in Lourdes Academy history sending the Knights back to the Kohl Center in Madison with aspirations of capturing the program's first WIAA state championship.

"It was the best moment of my life. Seeing the students storming the court felt amazing," said Jones. "I saw him wide open and I knew I had to close out really hard on him. I just jumped as high and as far as I could. I managed to get a couple fingers on it."

The top-seeded Knights (25-1) went on the road and escaped the Neillsville Fieldhouse with a 72-71 WIAA D4 sectional finals victory over Marathon (21-5) Saturday afternoon sporting its black and red uniforms.

"It was a physical game. They are a great basketball team. They only lost once for a reason," said Red Raiders senior Carter Hanke. "I am proud of the way we played. We gave it all out there for our team. We gave ourselves a chance to go to state and win the game. All you can ask for is an opportunity. I just wish them the best of luck at state."

With 18.9 seconds remaining in a down-to-the-wire battle, Marathon's Mitchell Kurtz swung the ball to Cameron Schilling (22 points) for the three as the Knights' 10-point lead was down to one.

The Red Raiders had an opportunity to tie the game with 5.6 seconds remaining as Schilling was fouled but missed the free throw. Jones snagged the rebound and was sent to the charity stripe but didn't convert. Hanke secured the rebound and found freshman Jaden Koeller for a game-winning attempt but Jones came away with the block as time expired.

"We have scenarios like this that we have in practice that helps set us up in that type of moment," said Jones, who had 15 points, seven rebounds and three blocks. "I just tried flying by him. I didn't want to get too close to him. I knew if I didn't do that there would have been a pretty good chance he would have made that since he is a pretty good three-point shooter."

Jones spent last season on the JV squad at Neenah before moving closer to his father and transferring to Lourdes.

"I am so happy that we gave him this opportunity," said Knights coach Brad Clark. "He comes from a great family. With him missing those free throws most kids would have pouted and dropped their head. The kid makes the play of the game. That says a lot about him. He is a gamer. He never gets tired, rattled or fatigued."

The Knights won their opening sectional game Thursday night 71-51 against Iola-Scandinavia (22-2) in Waupaca, where



Photos by Andy Ratchman

Hayden Jones of the Knights shoots a runner against the Marathon defense in Saturday's WIAA sectional final win at Neillsville. Lourdes players and fans (below) celebrate the victory that put them into the Division 4 semifinal against Osseo-Fairchild in Madison on Thursday.



sharpshooter Henry Noone was held scoreless for the first time this season. He scored 14 of his 18 points against Marathon in the first half.

"If you are a gambling person you don't bet against him, especially the next night," said Clark. "I know people made a big deal of the game he didn't score. For him he'd rather score no points and win to have an opportunity to play at the Kohl Center."

Defensively, Ben Huizenga was the glue for the Knights while coming back from injuring his patella last season and having his knee scoped five weeks ago.

"I tried to do my best to get stops defensively when I am not playing well offensively," said Huizenga. "Today I did my

best to get the loose balls and grab some rebounds. You got to go out there and play 100 percent or you're not going to be yourself again."

The play of the first half came down to a buzzer beater as Caden Chier would connect with Noone and with two dribbles knocked down a three-pointer as they headed into the locker room with the game tied at 36.

"It was a great feeling," said Noone. "That was probably the biggest three of my career and hopefully there is more Thursday as we keep going in state."

The Knights' goal is always to find the hot hand and keep feeding it, and in the second half Preston Ruedinger was that

guy with 18 of his 25 points on 8-for-9 shooting and converting five of seven free throws. One of his key plays was a heads-up steal and layup for a 46-43 lead and then hitting a three-point bucket on the following possession. Dennis Ruedinger, who coached the Knights for 16 seasons and three WIAA state appearances, was in the front row clapping with pleasure for his son and the team.

"No nervousness. It's more excitement that he is cheering me on," said Ruedinger. "I always look up to him. I try to play my game and he helps me on the floor, but I try to listen to my coaches."

After the game coach Clark shared an emotional hug with his 13-year-old son Steven, who was named after his grandfather Steven L. Randall, who coached at Oshkosh West.

"He loves it. It's been tough for him this year but he loves the game," said Clark of his son. "It's like when Ben (Huizenga) had Jack and Benny. You get that sense of what it really means. He has grown up with coaching his whole life and it's very special and I am glad he was able to experience it."

This will mark the Knights' fourth state tournament appearance as they will match up with Osseo-Fairchild (25-1) at 8:15 p.m. Thursday. The winner advances to the championship game against the winner of New Glarus (24-2) and Manitowoc Roncalli (26-0) Saturday at 12:45 p.m.