

Eastbrook advances to Sectional 39 Championship

By Sean Douglas

A plethora of successes marked the Eastbrook Panthers season, a testament to a high level of defensive play, characteristic of Coach Jeff Liddick’s tenure at the helm.

But when their offensive production matches their defensive intensity, the Panthers become a near unstoppable force.

Behind a 32-point fourth quarter, combined with tremendous performances up and down their entire lineup, the Panthers punched their ticket back to the Sectional 39 Championship, defeating the Blackford Bruins by a score of 87-52.

“The thing I enjoyed most about that game is that every girl who stepped on the floor contributed to that victory,” Liddick said. “—

both ends of the court, not just one end or the other. Every girl that stepped on the floor contributed and did something well for us that led to that victory. It was a great, overall team effort.”

Johwen McKim, who has been working to rediscover her offensive touch over the last few weeks, could not be stopped in the final quarter. She scored 13 of her team-high 19 points in the final eight minutes, driving into the lane with confidence, and making life difficult for the Bruins’ guards, collecting seven steals.

“I was happy for Johwen tonight,” Liddick said. “She has been struggling from the floor, especially finishing at the basket. She does a great job of getting there. Last Friday against Blackford, she was one-for-nine.

Tonight, she was seven-of-14. She was getting to the basket and finishing. Defensively, she made things tough. It was a great second half.”

Sophia Morrison knocked down her shots at the contest’s most crucial junctures, characteristic of her entire freshman campaign, hitting two threes in the fourth quarter to help extend the Panthers’ lead.

“When she is on, she is hard to stop,” Liddick said.

When called upon, Eastbrook’s bench answered the bell with resounding efficiency. Rachel Manning shot four-of-five from the field and two-of-two from long range to score 11 points, while Kristin Goff put together an electric fourth quarter, shooting four-of-six, including two threes, to score 10 points.

“That’s something we have been waiting on all year long,” Liddick said. “We saw it a little bit last Friday against Blackford, but tonight it was comforting as a coach to know that we can go that deep and not miss a beat. Hopefully tomorrow, we will be able to do that same thing. It’s going to be a much, much tougher task. Tipton is a juggernaut, and Coach [Chad] Wetz has his girls playing extremely well right now, and they play so hard, and they are so physical.”

However, it was the play of Olivia Howell in the second quarter and the continued emergence of Lily McLaughlin, which helped turn the contest in Eastbrook’s favor.

Howell, one of Eastbrook’s most tenacious defenders, took a hit to the

mouth, and was forced to leave the contest with a bloody lip.

“I kept looking at the bench thinking why are we not getting Liv back in the game. She is sitting there with this ice pack on her lip. I’m like ‘get back in there.’ And [assistant coach] Susan [Zent] was like, ‘she can’t go yet. She’s still bleeding.’ I kept looking down for about a two-or-three-minute stretch, and I looked at Susan and said, ‘get that thing checked again and see if we can get that bleeding stopped so we can get her back in the game.’”

With Howell out, the Bruins, who trailed by as many as six in the first quarter, began cutting into the Eastbrook advantage, making it a three-point game at 20-17 early in the second quarter. However, key baskets from Morrison and Manning helped the Panthers stem the tide, and once Howell returned, Eastbrook began to settle back into their game plan.

“She’s a fierce competitor,” Liddick said of Howell. “She has a full battery all the time.”

As Howell re-entered the game, McLaughlin followed, and made an immediate impact. In the second quarter alone, she scored five points and secured six rebounds, helping the Panthers gain control of the boards, after Blackford dominated that aspect of the game in the early stages. McLaughlin finished the contest with eight points and eight rebounds.

“Susan and I talked about [Lilly] before the game

tonight,” Liddick said. “I looked at her and I said we need Lilly to come in the game and give us a quarter like she did last Friday against Blackford. And that’s exactly what she did.”

The Panthers held a comfortable 38-25 lead at half-time and increased that advantage to 16 points at 46-30 midway through the third quarter. The Bruins put together a nice run, outscoring the Panthers 11-4 to trim the Panthers’ advantage to 48-40. However, McLaughlin stopped the bleeding in the waning moments of the period with a putback basket, putting the Panthers back ahead at 50-40.

Eastbrook went on to dominate the fourth quarter, outscoring the Bruins 32-17 to secure the 25-point triumph.

Eastbrook’s opponent in the Sectional 39 championship, Tipton, dominated the opening matchup against a short-handed Madison-Grant squad. The Blue Devils shot a scorching 11-of-13 from the field in the opening stanza and five-of-six from beyond the arc, building a 27-2 lead.

“We spent some time yesterday in practice discussing a couple of options defensively,” Madison-Grant Head Coach Brandon Bradley said. “We worked on some triangle-and-two, we worked on diamond-and-chaser. But when you’ve got four or five kids who shoot the basketball from three, that’s going to be difficult no matter who you are.”

The Argylls battled valiantly over the course of the final three quarters, but they were unable to recover from Tipton’s first quarter onslaught, falling to the Blue Devils 66-19.

In a tough, physical contest, Azmae Turner led the Argylls with five points, while defensive maven Chelsea Bowland and post player, Sarah Duncan, scored four.

“Chelsea played a position...she was not accustomed to play at that length,” Bradley said. “Chelsea did a great job of not only exhausting her defensively, but handling and taking care of the basketball. I thought Maddy [Moore] took care of the ball much better tonight. Sarah played her tail off from the second quarter on, Zoey played her tail off, and Azmae, that was as hard as she’s cut and as determined as she’s looked to try to score the basketball tonight. That was really good.”

Puzzle answers

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