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Sports

Strong first half lifts Mississinewa to Sectional 23 Championship

By Sean Douglas

When the Mississinewa Indians are locked in as a cohesive unit and playing to their strengths, they are a tough team to compete with and even tougher to defeat.

And for the first two quarters of their Sectional 23 semifinal contest against Heritage on Friday evening in Gas City, the Indians put together some of their best basketball of the season.

A 34-point first quarter, combined with stout performances from Tai McClung and Landen Swanner, the Indians punched their ticket to the championship game with a 76-61 triumph over the Patriots.

From the opening tip, it was clear that the Indians' gameplan was to get the ball inside, and it worked to perfection. McClung scored the first five points of the contest for Mississinewa, and it helped the Indians



Landen Swanner drives to the hoop in Mississinewa's Sectional 23 semifinal win over Heritage.

Photo by Sean Douglas

settle into their groove.

The 6-4 forward had no issues against a much smaller

Heritage lineup, scoring 10 points in the first eight minutes.

"Tai is just so special," Reed said. "When you really sit down and watch him play, every time he touches the ball, something great happens. He is the least selfish player that we have. He is always trying to find his teammates, but tonight, when his number was called, he was ready. Two nights in a row now, every time Tai McClung touched the ball, something great happened."

Meanwhile, on the perimeter, Landen Swanner let it fly, knocking down four of his six three-point attempts, while Hayden Ulerick also knocked down a pair of triples.

In all, the Indians shot 11-of-15 in the first eight minutes, taking a commanding 34-14 lead.

"We haven't hit shot for probably half the year. Literally, other than Landen, (we were) not hitting shots. So we've worked really, re-

ally hard on getting the ball inside," Mississinewa Head Coach James Reed said. "When a couple of shots started to fall, it made everything else that we've been working on that much easier."

"Kudos to our guys for being prepared, being ready, and coming with some fire." McClung continued to dominate in the second quarter, scoring the Indians' first 12 points and increasing Mississinewa's lead to 23 points. Swanner scored seven more points as well, as the Indians took a commanding 53-31 lead into the halftime break.

Armed with a big lead, the Indians relaxed a little bit in the second half. While their crisp play sagged in the final two quarters, their double-digit advantage remained intact.

"I couldn't be more excited with how we are playing,"

Reed said. "I think this is the best basketball that we have been playing this season, and that's where you want to be at the end of the season."

McClung finished the contest with 26 points, 22 of which came in the first half, while Swanner scored 19 in the Indians' victory. Hayden Ulerick also played a strong game for Mississinewa, recording a double-double with 10 points and 10 rebounds.

The Indians will face the Norwell Knights in the Sectional 23 Championship on Saturday evening.

"(We need to) prepare mentally and physically, and (make) sure we eat right and drink right tonight," Reed said. "We need to be as prepared tomorrow night as we have been for the last two nights. We are not thinking about anything other than winning tomorrow night."

Blackmon ties single-game scoring record, Argylls fall to Blackford

By Sean Douglas

Jalen Blackmon put on a show at the Bill Green Athletic Arena for Marion in its Sectional 7 quarterfinal, while the Madison-Grant Argylls battled valiantly against Blackford in Sectional 39.

However, in the end, the 2020-21 season came to an end for both squads. The Giants fell to longtime NCC rival Lafayette Jefferson 83-74, while the Argylls suffered a 63-53 defeat at the hands of the Bruins.

Blackmon, after scoring 48 points against Hamilton Southeastern and 52 against Fort Wayne Snider, made history in his final high school game, tying Tim Leavell's single-game scoring record with 55 points against the Bronchos. Blackmon shot an incredible 11-of-18 from the field and seven-of-14 from



beyond the arc, while adding 12 makes from the free-throw line.

However, Blackmon's heroics could not save Marion from a first-round play-off exit.

"It was a great game," Blackmon said. "I thought our gameplan got them stagnant a little bit, but they are a great team. I knew certain players were going to step up, and they stepped up at the right time."

The Giants scored the first four points of the con-

test and led 6-3 with 5:22 to play in the opening quarter, but the Bronchos ended the stanza on a 14-4 run to take a 17-10 advantage into the second quarter. Lafayette Jefferson star Brooks Barnhizer scored 11 points in the first eight minutes.

After scoring just four points in the first, Blackmon found his groove in the second, scoring 19 and twice cutting the Bronchos' lead to one possession. However, Lafayette Jefferson never lost their advan-

tage, as Barnhizer and Ashton Beaver combined for 15 points to help the Bronchos take a 36-31 lead into halftime.

Jacob Collicott slammed the door on the Giants in the third quarter, knocking down five of his six three-point attempts for 15 points and giving the Bronchos a 59-51 lead. Blackmon single-handedly kept the Giants afloat, but they were unable to get closer than seven points the rest of the way.

Blackmon finished his high school career with 2,269 points, the 18th-highest leading scorer in Indiana boys basketball history.

And while his dad revelled in his success, he was also proud of his team for all of the hard work they put in throughout the course of the season.

"I'm just proud of our guys," Blackmon said. "We had a great attitude on the

bench. Everybody was locked in and focused and supporting their teammates. I couldn't have asked for a better group of guys."

Rodney Gipson finished with eight points for the Giants, while Jermaine Woods finished with six. For the Bronchos, Barnhizer scored 27 points.

In Blackford, the Argylls got punched in the mouth early, as the Bruins built an early 18-11 lead after the first quarter. However, Madison-Grant bounced back, using a 12-0 run between the first and second quarters to take a 20-18 lead with 5:42 to play in the first half. Later in the frame, five points from Grant Brown, along with a free throw from Justin Moore, put the Argylls up 26-23 with less than a minute to play.

However, after the Argylls played excellent defense throughout the

second quarter, holding the Bruins to just five points in the first six minutes, Blackford star Luke Brown made his presence felt. A three-pointer from the Bruins' point guard tied the game at 26-26, and a steal and score at the buzzer gave Blackford a 28-26 lead at the halftime break.

A Kaden Howell three early in the second half put the Argylls up 29-28, but after that, Madison-Grant's offense went cold. The Argylls hit just three of their 12 field goal attempts in the frame, and the Bruins finished the quarter on a 7-0 run over the final two minutes, taking a 43-37 lead.

"Every possession matters. Our only goal is to win one possession at a time," M-G Head Coach Kevin Cherry said. "Those points you leave on the floor in those possessions,