

Flawless Finish: Crusaders cap off league play undefeated

Nick Wilson/The Times Standard

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EUREKA -- To the Wildcats' credit, they almost pulled off the unthinkable: Head into the Little 4 champs' house and pull off an upset on senior night.

And with Ferndale holding the lead deep into the fourth quarter, it looked like the visitors might give St. Bernard's its first blemish on its perfect league record, but it was not meant to be.

In the final minutes of the contest, the Crusaders pulled off a dramatic comeback and defeated the Cats 61-54 Wednesday, rounding out league play with a flawless record of 6-0.

"I'm so proud of these kids," said St. Bernard's head coach Steve Thrap. "I didn't do anything differently when we found ourselves behind. These guys have all been here before, they've heard what I have to say and they knew what to do."

And what they did was rally back from what was once a nine-point deficit in the first quarter. At the break, the Crusaders were down 26-31, yet the home team kept the intensity up coming out of the break and eventually closed the gap when St. Bernard's Andrew Ayers hit a jumper at the 4:00 mark of the third period, making the score 35-35.

Ferndale responded immediately and reclaimed the lead with a put-back bucket from Cole Salmon, who finished the night with a game-high 21 points and

seven rebounds.

But with the home team facing the prospect of defeat in the final quarter, the Crusaders pulled out all the stops.

Trailing Ferndale 52-46, St. Bernard's senior Nick Dalby kick-started the comeback with a trey that cut the Wildcat's lead to three, and on the next Crusader possession, Dalby struck again when he stroked a turn-around jumper from the elbow to bring his team within one point.

St. Bernard's finally jumped out ahead with a tip-in from big man Stephen Papstein.

However, Ferndale was not about to roll over, and the lead changed a number of times after that.

Two big St. Bernard's buckets put the team on top for good though.

With just over a minute left to go, Ayers navigated through thick traffic and came up with a left-handed layup that put the Crusaders up by three, and moments later, Dalby delivered the deal-sealer in the form of a 10-foot jumper.

"We knew that we had make some big plays to come back, and we were able to do just that," Dalby said after the game.

Ferndale head coach Justin Mora credited a trio of St. Bernard's seniors for their game changing performances in the fourth quarter.

"Ayers, Dalby and (Josh) Genevro made the difference," Mora said. "They had some timely baskets and we had some untimely misses. But Salmon did a great job for us inside all night and really stepped up offensively and defensively."

Also making major contributions for Ferndale were the Slade brothers, Jesse and James, who combined for 24 points and did their part on the defensive end by frequently disrupting the Crusaders' offense and coming up with several big blocks.

The win improved the Crusaders to 16-8 overall while the Wildcats dropped to 2-4 and 3-12.