

Del Norte defense wins Niclai championship

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The game was low-scoring, gritty and downright nasty.

In other words, the Del Norte Warriors were happier than clams in high tide.

Del Norte's Cody Hoffman scored a game-high 15 points and the defensive minded Warriors beat Arcata 35-30 on Friday to win their second Dick Niclai championship in the past three years at College of the Redwoods.

"We're not the greatest group of basketball players, but the team buys into the concept that if we play good defense, we're going to have a chance to win," said Del Norte head coach Blaine Lopez, who is also Del Norte's defensive coordinator on the football team. "And that's exactly what happened tonight. We hung in there with our defense and made our free throws down the stretch."

The two teams battled back and forth to a 30-30 tie with less than two minutes remaining in the contest, but in the final seconds, it was the Warriors who dominated the action, not allowing any easy looks on the defensive end and forcing turnovers that led to points.

Del Norte's Cole Lesley and Cliff Van Hook each got breakaway baskets in the game's final minute, and the Warriors, who shot 9-of-17 from the free-throw line, escaped the Tigers, who shot 3-of-11 from the line.

"They made their free throws, that was the difference," said Arcata head coach Eric Vollmers. "It was a typical game when you're playing Del Norte. They are a very fundamentally sound team that plays great defense, and they earned the victory tonight. Our hats go off to them."

Jordan Bianco scored a team-high 11 points for the Tigers, who dropped to 18-10 overall with the loss. Arcata's Nate Meyers finished with nine points and made several key baskets for the Tigers in the second half.

The win for Del Norte (18-5) marked the third time this season the Warriors have beaten Arcata.

"Any time two teams get together that know each other that well, there are definitely no surprises," Lopez said. "Give Arcata a lot of credit, they played us tough."

Del Norte, which won the Big Five championship this season, has an automatic berth into the North Coast Section playoffs, which start next week, while Arcata must plead its case at the seedings meeting on Sunday in Walnut Creek, but is expecting to possibly host in the first round.

“There’s a good possibility that our first section game will be at home,” Vollmers said. “We still have a lot of basketball left to play.”

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