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Year of the tiger: Arcata shuts down Ferndale early, wins back-to-back Niclai titles

Neil Tarpey/The Times-Standard
Posted: 02/20/2010 01:27:16 AM PST

ARCATA -- The old proverb, "He who hesitates is lost," might explain their downfall.

Whether it was championship jitters, unfamiliarity with Lumberjack Arena, or reluctance to shoot the ball, the Ferndale Wildcats were too cautious in the first quarter of their Dick Niclai championship game against Arcata on Friday.

"We were really tentative in the early going, and didn't wake up until halfway through the second quarter," said Ferndale head coach Justin Mora. "Then we made a few defensive stops, and that got us going."

In fact, if it weren't for Wildcat Jon Losa's putback basket that beat the final horn, Arcata would have shut out Ferndale in the opening period.

By that point, the Tigers led 18-2, and they motored to a 59-45 victory, successfully defending their Dick Niclai title.

"It's hard to get one," said Arcata's Jordan Semple, the game's high scorer with 17 points. "But it's harder to get two. It's a real good feeling."

It was the 13th consecutive victory for the Tigers (23-4 overall), who are the No. 9 ranked Division IV team in California.

And, considering that the Wildcats (20-4 overall) outscored the Tigers 43-41 over the next three quarters, it's clear that Ferndale's poor -- or Arcata's good -- opening quarter was the difference in the title game.

"I thought we played really well in that first quarter," said Arcata head coach Eric Vollmers.

"But then we seemed to lose focus, and tried to do too many things. My message is to try to keep it simple.

"Ferndale played hard, they always do. They have a good zone, but we were able to get it inside."

Arcata's big men -- Ryan DeHart, Noah Wheeler, Tom Witzel, Max Schmidt -- controlled the inside and dominated the Cats on the boards.

"They're big and they were more physical than us," said Mora.

DeHart had a superb blue-collar performance, pulling down 17 rebounds to go along with his 12 points.

"I knew that going in, rebounding would be my role," said DeHart. "I just wanted to rebound, to help our defense, and we were able to get the ball inside."

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Point guard Conor Byrne and Semple were able to penetrate the Cats' 2-3 zone, and find open teammates.

Semple, who almost connected with De Hart on a spectacular behind-the-back pass, thought that the most fun in the game was, "Breaking into the zone, and giving assists to the other guys."

But Arcata's strong inside presence wasn't its only offensive weapon.

The Tigers also nailed six 3-pointers, three by Semple, two by Byrne -- who finished with 11 points -- and one by Jordan Rode.

The Wildcats also connected six times from beyond the arc, with Adam Coppini and Andrew Matyshock each dialing long distance three times.

Two of Coppini's treys came in the third quarter when Ferndale -- who trailed 43-21 -- went on a 14-2 run that cut the score to 45-35.

But the defending champs responded, with DeHart and Semple scoring seven of the Tigers' next 10 points, while Arcata's mixed zone and man defenses held the Cats to just two baskets, one a Matyshock 3-ball.

Both Arcata and Ferndale will learn Sunday whom they will be playing when the North Coast Section playoffs begin this week. The Tigers, the undefeated Big 5 champions, and the Wildcats, the Little 4 co-champions with Hoopa Valley, might each receive first-round byes in Division IV and Division VI, respectively.

Dick Niclai Tournament

Prep boys championship game

Arcata 59, Ferndale 45

at Lumberjack Arena, HSU

Ferndale 2 11 18 14 -- 45

Arcata 18 11 16 14 -- 59

Scoring --

(Ferndale) Losa 12, Matyshock 11, Coppini 11, Semple 6, Slade 3, Wilkinson 2

(Arcata) Semple 17, Dehart 12, Byrne 11, Witzel 6, Wheeler 6, Rode 5, Nelson 2

3-pointers --

(Ferndale) Coppini 3, Matyshock 3

(Arcata) Semple 3, Byrne 2, Rode 1

Free throws --

(Ferndale) 5-8

(Arcata) 5-11

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