We did it!” Forest Park’s girls team cheers its regional championship and a date in the Class D quarterfinals.

KINGSFORD—It’s been a magical year for Forest Park’s girls basketball team—and it’s not over yet.

The Lady Trojans earned a berth in the Class D state quarterfinals March 8 with a hard-fought 50-47 win over Bark River-Harris in the regional championship game here.

The Broncos defeated Forest Park in last year’s regional title game, on their way to the Class D championship game. If the Lady Trojans win at Sault Ste. Marie on March 13, they will be going to East Lansing, too.

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They face Gaylord St. Mary in the quarterfinal game, which tips off at 7 p.m. Eastern Time (6 Central) at Soo High School.

To get there, they had to dethrone the Broncos, and Bark River did not go down easily. The teams battled twice earlier this season, each winning on its home floor.

The title game was intense and fiercely contested, with six lead changes—five in the fourth quarter. The final one came with 40.5 seconds left, when Tanner Bartczak made two free throws, putting the Lady Trojans in front 48-47.

Next, Kendra Campbell stole the ball, was intentionally fouled with 15 seconds left and made two more at the line for a 50-47 lead. Needing a three to force overtime, Bark River’s final shot was off-target, and Bartczak clutched the rebound as the horn sounded.

Time to celebrate! It’s the Lady Trojans’ first regional title since Jerry Hautala coached the fall 1995 team to the state finals, where they fell 49-39 to Portland St. Patrick.

(That 1995 team also faced Gaylord St. Mary in the quarterfinals, and Jackie Stoor was a senior starter. Today, Jackie Giuliani is the Trojans’ JV/assistant coach—and had her third baby the day of the Broncos game. Lexi Gussert’s dad, former boys coach Scott Gussert, pinch-hit as assistant coach.)

The Trojans had a big first quarter, rolling to a 16-3 lead, but Kylie VanBrocklin’s three that ended the quarter was a hint of what was coming: The Broncos used a tough press to force turnovers and spur on their offense. An 11-0 run, with five points from Jaime Madalinski, tied it at 19.

Campbell’s rebound basket with 2½ minutes left put the Trojans ahead 21-19, and it stayed at 21-19 for the rest of the half and three minutes into the third quarter.

Intense defense? And how! Both teams grabbed for the ball at every chance, and the refs let them play. Early in the second half, four jump balls were called in about a minute of game time.

Campbell and Gussert both hit threes later in the third quarter, and the Trojans led by five, but the Broncos broke out with a 12-2 run (seven by Jaime M.) to lead 36-31 with 6½ minutes left to

play.

The Trojans went into a man defense just after that. “They were forcing some shots up,” Coach Jeff Syrjanen said. “They couldn’t get their delay game going, and I think it took them out of their sync.

“We knew we could play man on them. But we didn’t want to exhaust ourselves and get in foul trouble early, so that’s why we stayed in a zone.”

The teams traded scoring spurts after that. FP scored seven and led 38-36. Broncos got seven and led 43-38. Trojans for eight and a 46-43 lead. BRH baskets by Abbie Madalinski and Megan Derusha put the Broncos ahead by a nose, 47-46, with 45 seconds left.

Moments later, Bartczak was fouled and stepped to the line.

It was an exhausting, intense game, one worthy of a regional final between two talented teams that didn’t hold anything back. Jaime Madalinski scored seven in the third quarter and nine in the fourth—16 of Bark River’s 28 second half points.

But down the stretch, the Lady Trojans had the edge: Gussert scored seven in the fourth frame, and Campbell and Bartczak both had four.

For the game, Gussert scored 20, Campbell had 14, Bartczak had seven, and Kaitlin Shamion scored six. Jaime Madalinski led the Broncos with 23, Derusha had eight, and Sarah Madalinski scored seven.

“We knew they would come after Lexi hard,” Syrjanen said. “But we also knew we have more than one player on our team, and they all showed up at some time in the game. They really did.”

After the final horn, they all joined in celebrating their regional title.

Neither team shot that well: Bark River, 26%, Forest Park, 29%. Other stats: Gussert, 13 rebounds, two blocks; Bartczak, 10 rebounds; Campbell, four steals; Shamion, three steals.

Two nights earlier, Coach Syrjanen had said, “It’s going to be a shame Thursday night when one of us doesn’t walk out of here as a winner. Both teams deserve it.

“Great program over in Bark River. I respect it a ton.”

On March 6, the semifinal game against Superior Central was close and tense—until the Lady Trojans broke away 24-13 in the fourth quarters, fueled by 14 points from Gussert and eight by Campbell.

The Cougars had held Gussert to two points in the first half and Campbell to one in the first three quarters. It had been nip and tuck with five lead changes by then. Neither team could break away

Superior Central got away to an early 10-3 lead, but the Trojans caught up in a low-scoring first half. Sholander’s basket and two Bartczak free throws put FP ahead 19-17 at halftime.

The Cougars’ Vanessa Freberg scored eight in the third quarter, including two late free throws and a shot at the horn that put her team ahead 29-28 as the fourth quarter began.

But Gussert had six in the third, and she and Campbell scored eight straight early in the fourth quarter to put the Trojans ahead 36-29. The Cougars never got closer than four after that, and Gussert and Campbell always came back to rebuild the lead.

In the final seconds, Gussert dribbled the length of the floor to score her 1,000th high school point—as a sophomore. Lady Trojans on the bench held up green and black signs toward the court. Then the girls turned around and showed the other side: “!STNIOP 0001”

Gussert led FP with 22 points, Bartczak had 11 (all in the first half), Campbell scored nine, and Audrey Sholander added eight. For the Cougars, Freberg led with 23, and Kelsey Coleman had 12.

After Freberg’s big third quarter, Syrjanen said, “We brought in Kendra Campbell and told her

her job was just to front her—and we just totally disrupted their offense. From then on, the game swung our way.”

Gussert was held to two points in the first half but got 20 in the second. “You can’t shut her down all game, I don’t care who you are.”

• The Lady Trojans face Gaylord St. Mary in the Class D quarterfinal, which tips off at 7 p.m. Eastern Time (6 Central).

The St. Mary Cathedral Snowbirds, with an enrollment of 58 students, posted a 23-1 record this season, losing only in their final game of the regular season to Mount Pleasant Sacred Heart. They defeated Mackinaw City and Posen at the regional tourney in Pellston.

The winner advances to the Breslin Center in East Lansing face the winner of the Jackson quarterfinal at 7:50 p.m. Eastern on March 15. The state championship game is at 10 a.m. Eastern on March 17.

The semifinal games will be streamed live on mhsaa.tv and foxsportsdetroit.com. The state title game will be telecast live on Fox Sports Detroit.

Trojans 8 11 9 24 -- 52
Cougars 11 6 12 13 -- 42
Broncos 6 13 13 15 -- 47
Trojans 16 5 10 19 -- 50