After the game, Trojan pride was on display by (from left) Kendra Campbell, Ana Cornelia, Audrey Sholander, Lexi Gussert, Tanner Bartczak, Kaitlin Shamion and Adel Isaacson.

CRYSTAL FALLS—The last U.P. girls team to start basketball practice this winter was the last team standing.

Due to its volleyball success last fall, Forest Park's girls started late and lost three of their first four games. But after that, they won 20 of 22 games and made it all the way to the state semifinals in East Lansing—the first time that has happened since the fall of 1995.

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The end came March 15 with a 61-48 loss to Athens in a semifinal game in East Lansing. The loss ended a super season—a 21-6 overall record and memories that will last a lifetime.

What a road it's been! What a time they had!

The Lady Trojans wouldn't have reached East Lansing if they didn't rally in the fourth quarter for a thrilling 59-57 win over Gaylord St. Mary in their quarterfinal game March 13 at Sault Ste. Marie.

That game had everything--including a highlight reel ending. So that's where our story begins.

The lead changed hands five times in the first three quarters. St. Mary went ahead midway through the third quarter and led by eight early in the fourth. The Lady Trojans hung in there and chipped away at the lead.

With a minute left, Audrey Sholander stole the ball and scored on a lay-up—Trojans back in front, 56-55. But a few seconds later, GSM's Mary Spyhalski hit a shot from the top. Snowbirds up 57-56 with 42 seconds left.

With 23 seconds to go, FP's Lexi Gussert was fouled while shooting. After a Snowbird time-out, Gussert missed her first shot but made the second—a 57-57 tie.

St. Mary called time again with 12.8 seconds left to set up a final shot. But with eight seconds left, Kaitlin Shamion fouled Karli Jacob, who stepped to the line, looking to break the tie. Her first shot missed, and FP Coach Jeff Syrjanen called time.

"We told them to get the ball to Lexi," the coach said later, "We were going to try to have her take it coast to coast. But if she's covered, fly!"

Jacob's second shot also missed—still tied 57-57—and the rebound went to Gussert. She dribbled to the right but saw several Snowbirds closing in. She also spotted Sholander running past half court, in the clear ahead of her. Gussert passed the ball ahead, Sholander took it, dribbled to the basket and released a shot. The ball fell through the twine just before the horn sounded.

Forest Park wins 59-57! Lady Trojans are going to East Lansing! Celebration! Hugs! Tears! Shrieks! What a play! What an ending!

"I never thought it would come down to me," Sholander said after the first wave of post-game

hugs and congratulations.

"Coach said, Clear the floor for Gussert! So I got out of way--and the next thing I knew, I was wide open. I saw that baseball pass, and I just knew it was my turn, so I put it in. Oh my God, I'm speechless!"

Gussert: "It came down to pushing it up at the end, and we didn't give up. We were going to try to clear out, and I was going to try to take it. But right when I took it down, three girls popped up on me, and I saw Audrey down there. I had all the confidence in the world to give it to her."

After the shot? "I went right to Audrey and gave her the biggest hug of my life. That's for sure!"

A surprise hero? Not to Syrjanen, who talked about Sholander's speed and composure in running Forest Park's offense. "She can hit the three when we need it, but she doesn't force it. She looks for her teammates all the time, and she plays the best defense. All-Skyline Conference defensive player three years in a row, if that tells you anything."

Gussert, a sophomore, also kept her cool with the season on the line. "Three people were on her," said the coach, "and it worked perfect. She made the perfect pass, and Audrey finished the shot. That's the game—that was it."

As for the game's first 31 minutes:

The Trojans got away to an early lead on a pair of Gussert threes, but the Snowbirds got going later in the quarter and took the lead early in the second on consecutive Jacob triples. Her third three made it a 23-17 lead, but threes by Gussert and Tanner Bartczak tied it again.

The Trojans led 37-31 midway through the third quarter, but two more Jacob threes fueled a 14-2 rally that put St. Mary ahead 45-39. Kari Borowiak scored 12 points in the third quarter, and her three to start the fourth put the Snowbirds ahead by eight, 51-43.

But another Gussert three and then her rebound basket sliced the gap to 51-48. Two Gussert free throws with two minutes left and then Bartczak's basket on an inbounds pass from Sholander cut GSM's lead to one, 55-54, with 1:21 left, setting the stage for the late drama.

Sholander scored six points in the third quarter, and Gussert led with 10 in the fourth frame. For the game, Gussert scored 27 points, Bartczak scored 17, and Sholander had eight.

Jacob scored eight in the third quarter, and Borowiak scored 12—but FP's defense held them to zero and three, respectively, in the final eight minutes. Jacob hit five threes, and Borowiak had four—both girls finished with 20 points.

The Lady Trojans had to scramble on defense, shifting to different zone defenses. That made them vulnerable to three-point shots, and the Snowbirds nailed nine of them. Two minutes into the fourth quarter, FP shifted to a man defense.

"If we're in man," Syrjanen explained, "we can stop the threes. But then we're vulnerable to fouls, and I did not want us to get in foul trouble." In the regional title game against Bark River, he also switched to a zone in the fourth quarter.

The Trojans made eight triples, with five by Gussert and two by Bartczak. "It was phenomenal shooting by both teams."

How could any game top that one? Two nights later, the Trojans took the floor at Michigan State University to take on Athens. They led 6-2 early, but Athens dominated the rest of the first quarter and led 16-10 after one.

Athens' defense held FP to just a two (Gussert) and a three (Bartczak) in the second quarter, as they scored 19 points. Athens made the most of its free throw chances, too, making 13 of 14 freebies in the first half. At halftime, they had a huge lead, 35-15.

"Their trapping defense and their depth," Syrjanen said, "were really the difference in the game. He [their coach] said he had nine starters on his team this year, and they all scored. They

always had fresh people, and we were forced to have three of our girls play the whole game.

"We kind of knew that all year—if we ran into a team with a lot of depth, we might be in trouble. We were able to get all the way there with very little depth."

The Lady Trojans tried to chip away at the lead in the third quarter, but Athens still led 43-26 after three. In the fourth, Gussert led a one-girl 9-2 rally, converting a pass, driving the lane, knocking in a three and making a jumper, cutting the lead to 49-37.

She scored 18 of the Lady Trojans' 22 points in the fourth quarter, but Athens never allowed FP to get closer than eight.

For the game, Gussert scored 34 of the Trojans' 48 points. "She was phenomenal," said Syrjanen. "She did everything she possibly could." Bartczak scored nine, and Sholander had five—they were the only Lady Trojans to score. For Athens' balanced attack, Payton Wood led with 13, and Leo Plasir added 10.

FP's shooting went from a dismal 25% in the first half to a sparkling 54% after halftime—but Athens outscored them 21-8 at the free throw line, and they won by 13. Athens also had a 19-8 edge in steals—FP turned the ball over 23 times.

After the game, Syrjanen talked about all the miles Forest Park had traveled during the playoffs: three trips to Bessemer, two to Kingsford, and last week's 1,000-mile journey to the Soo and then East Lansing before going home. It's a handicap that all U.P. teams must deal with.

But what a time they had!

"It was an amazing year," said Syrjanen. "We had a fantastic trip. The girls were tremendous to be around.

It was the end of the road for seniors Sholander, Bartczak, Shamion and Ana Cornelia. "We have four seniors who are going to be very hard to replace—not only because of their basketball abilities but because of their leadership, and they are great role models for our community."

But fear not, Lady Trojan fans. Lexi Gussert, an all-state first teamer in Class D, is only a sophomore.

Snowbirds 15 13 20 9 -- 57
Trojans 16 12 15 16 -- 59
Trojans 10 5 11 22 -- 48
Athens 16 19 8 18 -- 61