

FP's crazy February ends

Written by Peter Nocerini

Tuesday, March 05, 2013 3:35 PM -

CRYSTAL FALLS—That crush of games during February—10 in four weeks—is finally over for Forest Park's boys team. It's time for tournament basketball.

The Trojans closed out their regular season with a 61-41 loss at North Central on Feb. 26, followed by a 64-42 win at home over Republic-Michigamme on Feb. 28. ___PUBLIC___

The team finished its regular season 12-8 overall and 8-6 in the Skyline Conference. This week, it's the District 127 tournament at Bessemer.

At North Central: While the Trojans played fairly well, the Jets played better and had the upper hand all night. NC's Travis Vincent scored nine and Rob Granquist added six in the first eight minutes, helping their team to a 17-6 first quarter lead they never gave up.

"We didn't match up well," Coach Chris Nocerini said. "We missed probably five layups in that first quarter. That game should have been nip and tuck at the beginning, and [missing those shots] really changed the momentum."

After that, it was catch-up time. Austin Carlson scored six in the second quarter, as FP cut the lead to 28-20 at halftime, but the Jets ruled in the second half, 33-21.

Triple troubles: The stat sheet said the Trojans shot well inside the arc (making 44% of their two-pointers) but only connected on 3 of 16 on three-point tries, and their free-throw woes returned: 4 of 14.

FP's game with the Jets followed its one-point loss at home to Carney-Nadeau. "Probably one of the most emotional games I've been involved with as a coach," Nocerini said.

"We took on arguably two of the five best teams in Class D. We took one of them right to the brink of beating them. The other one? I feel we can match up with them.

"I hope we play them again—because it would be in the regionals."

Numbers: FP team: 14-32 (44%) 2's; 3-16 (19%) 3's; 4-14 (29%) FT. NC team: 15-30 (50%) 2's, 6-18 (33%) 3's, 13-22 (59%) FT.

FP stats: Chris Hilberg, 8 pts, 7 rebs; Austin Carlson, 8 pts, 3 rebs; Jeff Johnson, 7 pts, 2x3; Lee Graff, 6 pts, 3 rebs, 3 asts, 3 stls; Raymond Tomasik, 4 rebs, 2 asts; L.J. Burns, 4 asts. NC stats: Travis Vincent, 16 pts, 9 rebs; Rob Granquist, 12 pts, 4x3; Josh Granquist, 12 pts; Trevor Ekberg, 10 pts, 13 rebs.

Trojans	6	14	15	6	--	41
Jets	17	11	22	11	--	61

Vs. Republic: The season finale was originally scheduled for Dec. 6 but moved back to Feb. 28. While the coach wasn't too thrilled at the time, FP goes into the playoffs off a solid win.

The Trojan seniors were saluted before the game and played the entire first quarter. The Hawks led 8-2 when the regular crew came on in the second quarter and outscored Republic 62-34 the rest of the way.

"We did what we were supposed to do tonight," the coach said. "It's nice to end the season on a happy note."

Final game fun: The fans—who were already revved up—enjoyed a couple big thrills in the second half: Chris Hilberg's two-handed jam late in the third quarter and Austin Carlson's powerful block in the fourth. Whack!

The seniors—Derek Aberly, Hilberg, L.J. Burns and Jeff Willman—played for Nocerini through all four years of high school, both on JV or varsity. "Just a great bunch of senior kids.

"I always tease them—I tell Derek Aberly all the time, 'I'm the best you ever had in high school, right?' Derek laughs.

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"Great bunch of kids. They sparked our summer program. Let's hope they can spark us heading over into Bessemer."

Numbers: FP team: 20-44 (45%) FG, 6-19 (32%) 3's, 6-12 (50%) FT, 46 rebounds, 11 steals.

Republic team: 14-38 (37%) FG, 3-18 (17%) 3's, 5-12 (42%) FT, 38 rebs.

FP stats: Austin Snell, 19 pts, 6 rebs, 3 asts, 2 stls; Hilberg, 12 pts; Burns, 8 pts, 4 asts; Aberly, 8 pts, 7 rebs; Tomasik, 7 pts; Graff, 6 pts, 4 asts, 3 stls; Jeff Johnson, 3 asts; Jeff Willman, 6 rebs. Republic stats: Jonatan Lygdman, 19 pts, 10 rebs, 3 asts; David Simula, 9 pts; Philip Koski, 6 pts, 6 rebs.

Hawks 8 11 14 8 -- 42

Trojans 2 21 24 17 -- 64

Coming up: Action at the District 127 tourney in Bessemer started March 4, but the Trojans drew a first round bye and face the Watersmeet/Wakefield-Marenisco winner March 6 at 5:30, the first semifinal game.

The winner moves on to the district final March 8 at 7 p.m. against either Bessemer, Ewen-Trout Creek or Republic.