

SPORTS

Section 5AAAA Girls Basketball Semifinals: Spring Lake Park 67, Park Center 59

Signature stunner

Panthers knock off top seed to reach section finals

Patrick Slack
Staff Writer

A signature win.

During the regular season, Spring Lake Park made major strides, posting 14 victories to attain a winning record and a first-round home playoff game. Still, the Panthers remained on the prowl for that one landmark win.

As the last seconds ticked off the clock March 2, the moment came. And along with it, a spot in the Section 5AAAA championship.

Following a 61-47 win over No. 5 seed Champlin Park in the quarterfinals Feb. 27, fourth-seeded Spring Lake Park seized control down the stretch to stun top-seeded and eighth-ranked Park Center 67-59 in a roller-coaster Section 5AAAA semifinal in Blaine.

"The feeling was pure joy and excitement that is so hard to describe," Spring Lake Park head coach Randy Eatherton said. "For me, just so proud of the girls. We talked with the girls during the season about wanting to get a signature win for them and this program, and I think we accomplished that!"

"It was one of the best feelings I've ever had," said senior captain Jocelyn Talso, who scored a team-high 18 points. "To come in and beat the No. 1 seed was something everyone dreams of doing. It still doesn't feel real. It's so crazy and I'm so happy with my team and how hard we worked all season long to get to where we are now."

The first half went back and forth, with Park Center using a late 9-0 run to take a 31-26 lead into halftime.

The lead changed hands several times midway through the second half, with the Pirates still leading 46-45 with under seven minutes to go.

Spring Lake Park heated up down the stretch, though, going on a 14-2 run with a mix of at-



Spring Lake Park's Joelle Talso dribbles out the final seconds as the Panther bench celebrates a 67-59 win over top-seeded Park Center in the Section 5AAAA semifinals March 2. Photo by Patrick Slack

tacks to the basket and perimeter shots to build a double-digit lead with two minutes remaining.

The Pirates tried to pressure their way back within striking distance in the closing possessions, but Spring Lake Park wouldn't waver, closing out the win at the free-throw line to advance.

"Offensively for us we started to get comfortable and into a rhythm," Eatherton said. "Normally when we play PC they dictate the pace, but today in the second half we controlled this. We also took advantage of mismatches that we felt we had against them when they switched on Joelle (Talso). She did a great job of being aggressive to the basket and finishing or drawing the foul. When they

decided to bring help in from the corner to stop her, she found Jocelyn in the corner for a couple big 3-point baskets."

Jocelyn Talso was joined in double figures by Joelle Talso with 14 points and Taryn Richard with 10. Julie Levahn, Madi Ngene and Taylor Falvey all added 6 points and Averi Dunbar scored 5 as the Panthers' balanced offensive output proved too much for Park Center to contain.

"For us to be in this position, we had a number of girls that played well," Eatherton said. "Taryn had some big rebounds and hit three big threes. Taylor came off the bench and played awesome on both ends of the court. Julia had some huge steals and points. Madi controlled the paint with some big rebounds

and defense. Averi handled the full-court pressure beautifully, which allowed us to get into our offense, so this was a total team effort."

"It took us everything that we have been working for all season," Jocelyn Talso said. "We had to play together as a team and play with the mindset that we can compete with any team in our conference. Overall, we felt like we played really well as a team and we didn't allow ourselves to give up when we were down. We kept pushing through and we gave it all we had, and at the end of the game it showed."

Despite falling to Park Center twice in the regular season by margins of 81-56 and 67-47, the latter coming just eight days prior in their regular season finale, the Panthers were poised for a

much closer showdown this time around.

"Yes! That may seem easy to say now, but we were confident that we would play well," Eatherton said. "The first couple times we played them, each game they went on scoring runs, outscoring us by 10 points or more, and we knew that we could not let this happen. We wanted to keep it close into the second half and then hopefully we could make a run against them, and that is what happened. We played with confidence the entire game, but we kept our poise over the last four minutes when they were trying to make a run."

The win put the Panthers' record at 16-12 on the season, doubling last season's win total and exceeding that of the past three seasons combined.

"We have improved together as a team by always pushing ourselves, motivating each other and never giving up," Jocelyn Talso said. "Since ninth grade for me, no one really thought of SLP as a winning team, but we worked hard all these years to change that. We had a saying this year by one of our coaches, which is 'Satisfactory isn't good enough anymore.' This is why we try to work harder than everyone else; because we believe in this conference to be a winning team we need to take it to the next level."

Spring Lake Park's Section 5AAAA championship opponent is second-seeded Centennial, scheduled for March 7.

"We know Centennial is a very good team, but we are looking forward to playing them," Eatherton said. "They are a much bigger team than Park Center, so we will need to make a few adjustments, but in the end whichever team executes better will win. We are excited to be playing."

The winner advances to the Class 4A state tournament March 13-16.

patrick.slack@ecm-inc.com