

BOYS BASKETBALL

# Knights play near perfect to halt Ashby's run

By Eric Morken  
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The West Central Area boys basketball team may have played under the radar a bit this year with a team like Ashby going undefeated through the regular season out of their subsection, but those who have watched the Knights closely know how good they are.

West Central Area's four losses have all been by single digits. One of those was a 56-53 loss against Ashby in the season opener on Jan. 18. Given a chance to avenge that loss on Saturday night, the Knights (15-4) did so emphatically with a 61-38 win over the South's top-seeded and Class A's second-ranked team in Ashby (19-1) to advance to the 6A semifinals.

"I love our guys," WCA senior point guard Grant Beuckens said after scoring a team-high 18 points. "Our guys knew we could do it from day one, and here we are showing it. We proved ourselves tonight, and we're just going to keep rolling."

West Central Area outscored the Arrows 30-17

after the break, but it was a burst going into the half that swung the tide. In a one-possession game, WCA junior forward Ryder Staples went on a personal 8-0 run with two made threes and two free throws that made it 31-21 at halftime.

"Ryder does that every game. He's huge," head coach Kraig Hunter said. "He's one of our best threats. When he gets going, I think the team kind of feeds off of him."

Beuckens, the Knights' senior floor general, wasn't going to let a double-digit lead slip away. He was a huge piece of the puzzle in West Central Area's run to the section title game a year ago, and that experience played a big part on Saturday.

"It helped us so much," Beuckens said. "We've all handled pressure in the playoffs. We know what that playoff atmosphere is like."

Beuckens hit a three from the left wing that made it a 39-27 game almost five minutes into the second half. He added six rebounds, four assists and three steals to his line.

"I don't know what the season stats are, but I'm pretty sure he's averaging less than one turnover a game," Hunter said of Beuckens. "When you handle the ball that much, that's impressive."

Knights' senior Xander Bontjes hit perhaps the biggest three of the game when he found himself wide open in the corner to make it 42-27 with 11:39 left. The Knights went on to extend their lead to more than 20 points through much of the final minutes.

The Arrows hit 10 threes in their regular-season win over the Knights. They hit just one on Saturday, while West Central Area knocked down seven triples. Three of those came from sophomore guard Jacob Strunk off the bench.

"We were in pretty severe foul trouble, and they kept making shots," Ashby coach John Holsten said. "They wouldn't cooperate. They got most of the 50/50 balls, and as much as it pains me to say it we got outcoached big time. We didn't have them ready to play."

Holsten knows how

bad this stings for his players, but he also knows they have a lot to be proud of after one of the best seasons in program history. It included a Little Eight Conference championship and the No. 2 ranking in the state much of the year.

"(Shots) just weren't falling tonight, and there's a reason for that," Holsten said. "They were playing really good defense on our perimeter shooters."

Ashby junior forward Jacob Cook had a game-high 20 points on a night when just five Arrows scored. Jaden Norby wrapped up his stand-out career for Ashby with eight points.

WCA will play at second-seeded Hancock (15-5) at 7 p.m. on March 24 after the Owls beat Parkers Prairie (15-5) Saturday night in a 56-48 final. Hancock and WCA split during the regular season with the Knights winning 62-58 on Jan. 28 and the Owls winning 48-46 on March 1.

WEST CENTRAL AREA (15-4) 31 30 - 61  
ASHBY (19-1) 21 17 - 38  
WCA - Ryder Staples - 12 points, 6 rebounds, 1 assist; Cole Anderson - 3 points, 5 rebounds, 5 assists, 1 steal; Jacob Strunk - 9 points, 1 rebound, 1 assist, 1 steal; Grant Beuckens - 18 points, 6 rebounds, 4 assists, 3 steals; Tate Christenson - 6 points, 3 rebounds, 2 steals, 2 assists; Nathaniel



Eric Morken / Echo Press

West Central Area senior point guard Grant Beuckens lets out a scream after fellow senior Xander Bontjes hit a three that gave the Knights a 15-point second-half lead in Ashby on Saturday night. Beuckens had a team-high 18 points in helping WCA to a win that sends the Knights to the section semifinals at Hancock on March 24.

Junker - 2 points; Xander Bontjes - 3 points, 1 rebound, 1 steal; Brady Reeve - 8 points, 5 rebounds, 4 assists

ASHBY SCORING - Derrek Bartz - 4; Hunter Norby - 2; Torin Olson - 4; Jacob Cook - 20; Jaden Norby - 8

BOYS BASKETBALL

# Cards overcome off shooting woes in quarterfinals

By Eric Morken  
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Alexandria boys basketball coach Forrest Witt has talked all season about how defense has to be the catalyst of what is going to carry this Cardinals team each night.

Alexandria (18-1) just put up 104 points on the Tigers (4-14) on March 13, but offense was much harder to come by in the Section 8-3A Tournament quarterfinals on Friday.

Tech played a 2-3 zone and held the Cardinals to well below their season average of 71-points per game. That's where Alexandria's attention to defense was so important with the top-seeded Cardinals surviving a bit of a scare against the eighth-seeded Tigers in a 55-43 win.

"They were more active defensively, and we didn't shoot the ball particularly well," Witt said. "Part of that was due to their defense, and we just played a little bit tight."

Alexandria's Colton Roderick and Kristen Hoskins both had tough nights offensively with a combined 12 points, but Witt lauded how they did not let that impact them on the defensive end.

"It's one of those things where your defense is going to win you games," Witt said. "Our guys were, I don't know if 'down' is the right word, but we knew we didn't play real well on offense. The message was just defensively we were really good, and that won us the game. That's something to be really proud of."

The Cardinals have bought into that message all season for the most part. They are



Lowell Anderson / Echo Press

Alexandria junior forward Erik Hedstrom attacks the St. Cloud Tech defense around the rim on Friday night in the Cardinals' 55-43 win in the playoff opener. Hedstrom had a team-high 20 points.

holding opponents to a section-low 52.1 points per game. Some added pressure of the playoffs has the potential to make for tough nights offensively.

"I've always felt that there is no tightness or anxiety or, 'We should win because we're the No. 1 seed,' on defense," Witt said. "You just play hard, and that's part of the reason why that's what you can always rely on."

Junior guard Wyatt Odland got nine big points against the Tigers. Senior center Kobe Jenson added nine, and junior forward Erik Hedstrom continued his productive stretch with 20 points.

"He has been playing very well," Witt said of Hedstrom. "He kind of had that little shooting slump mid-way (in the season), but he dug himself out

and he's been scoring well."

The win sent Alexandria into the section semifinals last night, Tuesday, against St. Cloud Apollo.

The fifth-seeded Eagles (8-11) beat fourth-seeded Detroit Lakes (9-8) 54-52 in overtime on Friday when Jamari Abston hit a pull-up jumper from the left wing at the buzzer to win it.

It will be the third game this season between these two teams that met in last year's Section 8-3A title game. The Cardinals beat the Eagles 92-57 on Jan. 25 and 86-51 on Feb. 5.

Visit [www.echopress.com](http://www.echopress.com) for immediate results from the semifinal game or see the March 26 print issue of the *Echo Press*.

ALEXANDRIA 55, ST. CLOUD TECH 43  
ALEXANDRIA SCORING - Myles Sansted - 5; Wyatt Odland - 9; Kristen Hoskins - 5; Erik Hedstrom - 20; Colton Roderick - 7; Kobe Jenson - 9

GIRLS BASKETBALL

# Cards leave no doubt in playoff opener

By Eric Morken  
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The Alexandria girls basketball team beat St. Cloud Apollo by a combined 103 points in two games during the regular season, and it was a similar story in the Section 8-3A Tournament opener last Thursday night.

The Cardinals (15-4) dominated the Eagles (1-16) in the eight-versus-one-seed matchup, winning 54-19 to set up a semifinal game against Sartell-St. Stephen (8-11) last night, Tuesday. Alexandria allowed just three points in the first half on Thursday. It led to a 36-point lead by the break that the Cardinals never came close to giving back.

"We are a different team the last two weeks," Alexandria head coach Wendy Kohler said. "Playing Fergus Falls (March

11 in a 62-54 loss) was a valuable game for us because we were really able to pinpoint what's going well and what needs work. We have really become laser-focused the last two weeks."

Teams at all levels of sports play down to their competition sometimes, but that seldom happens with this Alexandria girls basketball program.

"It doesn't matter who you're playing. You're always playing for something, whether it be positioning yourselves for later in the season for a seed," Kohler said. "You're always looking to take steps forward as a team, otherwise it's pointless. I think that's just a good mantra in life."

ALEXANDRIA 64, ST. CLOUD APOLLO 19  
ALEXANDRIA SCORING - Cate Bloom - 9; Mataya Hoelscher - 6; Myah Kremer - 6; Alayna Strand - 6; Lilly Thul - 5; Lilly Horn - 5; Morgan Jones - 5; Jaya Hallestad - 3; Ellie Heydt - 3; Greta Oldencamp - 2; Hannah Boraas - 2; Hadley Thul - 2

BOYS BASKETBALL

# Annandale rallies to end Osakis' season

By Eric Morken  
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The Osakis boys basketball team saw its season end in a heartbreaker after battling third-seeded Annandale down to the wire in a 67-63 final in the Section 6AA' second round on Saturday.

The Silverstreaks (14-6) beat Royalton (8-11) 65-42 in the playoff opener on March 18. They led Annandale 36-29 at the half, but the Cardinals (16-1) responded with 38 points after the break.

"The guys did a great job executing our defensive game plan, but we had some miscues that ended up being costly," Osakis head coach Matt Hoelscher said. "Give Annandale credit for making their shots when they needed to...We had a lead throughout the first half due to our press break, defensive rebounding and cutting hard on offense. We were able to finish (junior guard) Bauer (Klimek) early and he made some big threes to give us momentum."

Klimek finished with 27 points on 10-of-18 shooting. He knocked down 5-of-11 threes. Freshman guard Kyle Mages added 11 points on a night where

Osakis shot 49% from the field (26-53).

"We got in trouble early but guys like Kellen (Anderson) and Carter (Watnaas) stepped up defensively and made some plays on offense," Hoelscher said. "Some mishaps in the second half on defense and missing open looks, some turnovers, and giving up offensive rebounds at inopportune times ended up in Annandale's favor."

The Silverstreaks had a lot to prove this year with an almost entirely new group of players asked to step up into big roles. Osakis did that, finishing with 14 wins and a fifth-straight Prairie Conference championship by going unbeaten in league play at 10-0.

"So thankful we had a season and for giving the players an opportunity to prove a lot of people wrong," Hoelscher said. "Many thought we would

be mediocre due to everyone we lost from last year. Even in a loss, the guys gained confidence that will hopefully carry over to this summer and next season."

Anderson was the lone senior to play on Saturday night, with a lot of guys who saw extended minutes set to return next winter.

"We are excited about what we have coming back as our team made great strides and matured throughout the year," Hoelscher said. "We will miss our seniors, Kellen and (student) managers Brittany (Dietrich) and Jacey (Larson), but are excited for them to succeed at the next chapter in their lives. We know they will do big things."

ANNANDALE 29 38 - 67  
OSAKIS 36 27 - 63  
OSAKIS - Mekai Hoelscher - 2 points, 1 rebound; Kellen Anderson - 6 points, 1 rebound, 2 steals; Stewart Jones - 11 points, 2 assists, 2 rebounds; Kyle Mages - 11 points, 2 assists, 4 rebounds; Bauer Klimek - 27 points, 2 assists, 1 steal; Drew Imdieke - 2 points, 2 assists, 3 rebounds; Carter Watnaas - 7 points, 3 assists, 4 rebounds; Brady Mages - 5 points, 2 assists, 6 rebounds

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