

GIRLS BASKETBALL

Panthers storm back against B-E

By Eric Morken

Alexandria Echo Press

EVANSVILLE — The Brandon-Evansville and Parkers Prairie girls basketball teams have played a lot of big games against each other over the years as conference and section rivals, and Monday's matchup likely had some playoff implications as well.

Parkers Prairie won a low-scoring game against Brandon-Evansville on Jan. 11, and the Panthers (9-8) likely secured a better seed than the Chargers (9-11) by storming back from eight down in the final minutes of the rematch to win 59-55 in overtime at Evansville.

"This group of girls I have right now, that's kind of been their thing the whole year," Parkers Prairie head coach John Noga said. "They just keep playing hard."

Brandon-Evansville

led 49-41 with almost two minutes left in regulation. Panthers' junior guard Cora Johnson hit two quick threes to make it a 49-47 game.

"A couple practices ago, I finally said to her, 'You need to shoot more,'" Noga said. "She had our overall best shooting percentage. She hadn't taken the most shots, but she's a very good shooter."

Johnson got fouled on her second made three and had a chance at a 4-point play. She missed the free throw, but senior Lydia Guenther got the offensive rebound and was fouled. Guenther made one of two free throws to make it a 49-48 deficit.

The Panthers forced a Chargers' turnover on the next possession. Junior Kad Wehking then hit a three to give Parkers Prairie a 51-49 lead. Brandon-Evansville tied

it on a Kaytlyn Pattrin layup off an offensive rebound, but the Panthers outscored the Chargers 8-4 in overtime.

Wehking had six points in the extra session. She finished with 18 points after knocking down four of Parkers Prairie's seven threes.

"Offensively, she is the one girl who is always looking to score, which is great," Noga said. "You always need a kid like that that's not afraid in big moments or throughout the whole game. She'll shoot, she'll drive to the basket."

The Panthers are positioned well to host a playoff game with the regular-season sweep of Brandon-Evansville giving them the tiebreaker in the chase for the fourth seed. Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg (9-12) may also be within reach for the third seed in the 6A-South.

Five different players scored at least seven points for the Chargers. Senior center Kiley Lund had 11, while Pattrin had 10 points and a team-high 6 rebounds. It was a much better offensive performance after a 67-23 loss to Hancock (20-1) on Saturday.

"Hancock makes everyone look bad offensively, but we have been playing a lot better offensively," B-E head coach Zach Traphagen said. "The ball is moving around a lot better. We have girls who are shooting with more confidence. We've always attacked the basket well."

Traphagen liked the effort his team gave on Monday, but said the Chargers need to take lessons from the loss and play with better composure. They had three more chances to bounce back this week with games at Wheaton (16-



Eric Morken / Alexandria Echo Press

Parkers Prairie junior Avery Benzinger, left, and Brandon-Evansville sophomore Skylar Bitzan dive after a loose ball during an overtime win for the Panthers on Monday.

3) on Tuesday, Ashby (1-16) on Thursday and then home against Park Christian (5-15) on Friday night at 7:15.

"You got to learn from it," Traphagen said. "Then you forget about that pain you felt, go out there and play fearless, with more effort than the other team. If we can do that, we will be just fine."

BRANDON-EVANSVILLE 21 30 4-55
PARKERS PRAIRIE 20 31 9-59
B-E - Grace Otto - 1 rebound, 1 steal; Sophie Koep - 1 point, 4 assists, 1 block, 2 rebounds; Olivia Otto - 9 points, 1 assist, 4 rebounds, 1 steal; Sydney Schaefer - 3 points, 1 assist; Kaytlyn Pattrin - 10 points, 1 assist, 6 rebounds, 3 steals; EmmaLee Brethorst - 5 points, 1 rebound, 1 steal; Skylar Bitzan - 1 block; Hadley Baune - 7 points, 1 assist, 3 rebounds, 2 steals; Kiley Lund - 11 points, 4 rebounds, 2 steals
PARKERS PRAIRIE SCORING - Cora Johnson - 12; Lydia Guenther - 13; Kad Wehking - 18; Avery Benzinger - 9; Abigail Ruckheim - 5; Ellie Koep - 2

Email sports and outdoor editor Eric Morken at emorken@echopress.com.

RACES

From Page 10

freestyle) and Kasey Soderholm (27th, 37:58.4; 20:00.2 classic, 17:58.2 freestyle) also raced the pursuit, and senior Lauren Englund did the same and finished 25th in 37:13 (19:22.5 classic, 17:50.5 freestyle).

The two-person team of Lauren Huber and Dulce Bakker skied the relay for Alexandria. They were third in the preliminary round with a time of 20:02.6 before finishing fifth in the finals in 19:32.7.

"We would like to express our gratitude to our three seniors — Dulce Bakker, Lauren Englund, and Matthew Johnson — for the years of dedication and contribution in which we will always be grateful for," Rapp said.

Johnson wrapped up his Alexandria career by taking 50th in the boys pursuit race with a total time of 47:36.3 (30:03.6 classic, 17:32.7 freestyle).

Junior Ryker Bosek led the Alexandria boys with a 13th-place finish in the pursuit. He came across in a total time of 30:52.1 after skiing the classic portion in 16:12.5 and the freestyle in 14:39.6. Junior Connor Grant of Little Falls won the pursuit title in 28:05 (14:40.3 classic, 13:24.7 freestyle), and junior Zaine Braaten of Moorhead was second in 28:13.1 (14:46.2 classic, 13:26.9 freestyle).

Alexandria junior Spenser Chinn raced to a 26th-place finish in 34:42.4 (18:11.1 classic, 16:31.3). Sophomore Cyler Coauette (33rd, 36:04.6; 18:35.6 classic, 17:29 freestyle) and freshman Colton Converse (40th, 38:30.1; 20:14.1 classic, 18:16 freestyle) rounded out the Cardinals' lineup in the pursuit.

The Alexandria duo of Maxwell Chinn and Luke Walsh qualified for the relay finals with a time of 19:31.2 in the prelims. They were seventh in the finals with a time of 19:29.4.

The state meet at Giants Ridge in Biwabik is set for Feb. 16 and 17. The girls' 5K classic race will take place at 3 p.m. on Feb. 16 before the 5K freestyle runs at that same time on Feb. 17.

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STAGE

From Page 10

her teammate, Sara Eddy (ninth, 9.275). Fettig added a 10th-place finish on the beam (8.950), a six-place finish on the bars (8.850) and then a fifth-place finish on the floor (9.325) to wrap up her day.

"I had felt pretty solid about all of my events throughout that entire meet, and just really proud of what I had put out there," she said. "Floor just kind of sealed that good feeling within me that I did do a good job today. Then it really didn't matter about the scores or where I placed because

I knew that I went out there and put my best foot forward."

There were certainly mixed feelings heading into the meet. Nerves were at play knowing this was the opportunity she had worked so hard for, but she brushed that aside to enjoy the experience.

"This entire season, state has always been my big goal," Fettig said. "There's a lot of pressure when it's your last year, so throughout the season I just tried to remind myself that gymnastics is more than just one performance, one meet. Instead of maybe this could be my last meet ever, I tried focusing on, 'Wow, I get to have this

experience with my team doing the sport that I love."

The state team gymnastics meet is scheduled for Feb. 18 at the Roy Wilkins Auditorium in St. Paul.

Fettig will take in her last high school competition on the biggest stage in the state when she competes in the individual meet on Feb. 19. The Class AA meet begins at 11 a.m.

"I have been wanting to try out a couple new skills," Fettig said. "I just played it a little bit safe at sections to make sure that all of my routines were super clean and I had the best chance of making it to state. We always say sections is the hard-

est part because once you're at state, you've made it. I'm really just going to have fun there and enjoy the experience."

SECTION 8AA CHAMPIONSHIP
TEAM SCORES - 1. St. Cloud Tech - 147.325; 2. Bemidji - 142.300; 3. Brainerd - 142.150; 4. Monticello - 141.500; 5. Sartell-St. Stephen - 140.875; 6. Sauk Rapids-Rice - 135.550; 7. Alexandria - 134.375; 8. Moorhead - 121.725

ALEXANDRIA - All-Around - Ailyn Fettig - third, 36.325

VAULT - Sara Eddy - ninth, 9.275; Ailyn Fettig - 11th, 9.2; Loren Buggert - 24th, 8.850; Izzy Kent - 25th, 8.850; Jamie Aldis - 39th, 8.20

BARS - Ailyn Fettig - sixth, 8.850; Addison Twa - 20th, 8.225; Addison Fettig - 32nd, 7.375; Buggert - 34th, 7.300; Kent - 35th, 7.150

BEAM - Ailyn Fettig - 10th, 8.950; Hallie Kent - 25th, 8.300; Twa - 28th, 7.875; Eddy - 29th, 7.850; Buggert - 34th, 7.425

FLOOR - Ailyn Fettig - fifth, 9.325; Eddy - 30th, 8.150; Dylan Witt - 32nd, 8.100; Addison Fettig - 35th, 7.900; Twa - 37th, 7.850

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JACK

From Page 10

cycles of chemotherapy treatments that will take place over the course of six months.

It's the fight of his young life, but Jack's father, Joe, said doctors are optimistic.

"They're very optimistic, and we are too," Joe said. "The cancer he has is a really aggressive kind, and so the chemo is also really aggressive. He's got a tremendous fight to get through this, but we fully believe and are optimistic that he can."

Alexandria quickly becomes home

It took very little time for the Alberts — Joe, Kim, Jack and his 12-year-old sister, Victoria — to integrate themselves into the Alexandria community.

They moved here from Bloomington in the spring of 2021 after previously spending as much time as they could in Alexandria at a cabin that has been in the family for years.

Kim and Joe were both able to work remotely after the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and it was always the plan to move to the lakes area if it was ever possible.

A big part of that draw was because of Jack. Jack loves hockey in the winter. He loves baseball in the spring and summer, and he loves fishing any chance he can get.

"We bass fish all the time during the summer," Joe said. "When we first moved up here, Jack wanted to go fishing every day no matter what it was, if it was 30 mile-per-hour winds and 40 degrees. It was like, 'Hey, bud, we live up here now. We can take a day off.'"

The Alberts made fast friends in Alexandria. Joe coached baseball. Kim volunteered within the hockey program, and the family got involved in their church at Calvary Lutheran. Jack and Victoria's involvement in activities led to even more friendships.

"We've only been there nine months, but we love it so hard," Kim said. "We've thrown ourselves into the community."

Hard to put into words

Jack now has an entire community pulling for him.

After the cancer diagnosis, Joe and Kim created a Facebook page called "Albert Strong" to

share updates on how Jack is doing.

A post from Feb. 13 shared some great news. Jack's numbers had improved so much that he was allowed to go home for a week before the second round of chemotherapy begins. Jack says, "I'm going home!" in the video before giving a big fist pump.

The Facebook wall is filled with photos and videos the family has received offering him encouragement. Through help getting the word out from a parent in Alexandria's youth hockey program, Jack's story has reached some of the biggest names in sports and entertainment.

Former Minnesota Twins star Joe Mauer, hockey great Wayne Gretzky, musician Zac Brown, and professional bass angler Seth Feider of Bloomington are some of the notable names who have sent well wishes through video.

Joe's siblings created a GoFundMe page for Jack to help the family with expenses that will come over the next several months. People have donated more than \$46,000 as of Feb. 11.

"It's incredible. Every time we talk about it, you just kind of run out of adjectives to describe it," Joe said of all the support. "It's truly meant everything. It's people that we haven't known for that long, people we don't know who are just taking it upon themselves to make us feel not just welcomed, but like family. It's truly amazing. Humbling is a good word for it too."

Jack got a video from the high school Alexandria boys hockey team with individual players sending him their encouragement. He watched it over and over again.

"Those are his heroes, so it meant a lot that they would take the time to do that," Joe said. "They're kids he's watched and looked up to."

Jack's immune system has been so weak that Joe and Kim were about the only family members who could be with him in the hospital.

Kim left the Twin Cities one

to feeling sick before his cancer diagnosis.

He is now enrolled in the city of Minneapolis Public Schools system so he can meet with a private tutor. They communicate with staff from Woodland to stay on the same page so Jack can jump back into Woodland when he is ready.

Kim said the goal is to get him back with his classmates as soon as possible. First through Google meets, then hopefully in person. Jack will be in the hospital for two months as he goes through the most aggressive chemotherapy sessions.

"Then the next four are a little less aggressive, so we're hoping during that time we'll be able to have him at Woodland for a period of time," Kim said.

Kim and Joe want to do everything to keep Jack feeling like a kid and not a cancer patient.

"That's what Alexandria has done for us," Kim said. "Jack's hockey team checks in with him morning, noon and night. They're at the games and holding his jersey, they're skating him through the lineup. They're calling him before and after. They just talk to him like his friends. They make him feel like Jack and not a cancer patient. That's needed. They send care packages like you would not believe. It brings him so much joy."

There are days right now when Jack can barely lift his legs to get out of bed to move his body during physical therapy, but he finds the courage to do it.

"He takes it one step at a time," Joe said. "He fights through it, and has that positive attitude, fighting spirit. It's really easy when you're dealing with this kind of stuff to wonder why or get down in the dumps, but he doesn't do that."

Cancer and the chemotherapy treatments have weakened Jack's body. They have not dampened the spirit that so many people love him for.

"He is the strongest person I know. He's so strong," Kim said. "There's the chemo, this poison, going into his veins and he's just singing and playing the guitar and talking to his buddies. He's doing amazing, and he's just so positive. He's always upbeat and sunny no matter what. He's physically and mentally the strongest, most positive person that I know."

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