

SECTION CHAMPIONS

CRUSADERS WIN BACK-TO-BACK TITLES BY AVENGING LAST YEAR'S LOSS

BY JAMES STITT

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Sleepy Eye St. Mary's ended the season of the Mayer Lutheran girls basketball team last year, after the Crusaders finally got their breakthrough win to make the Class A State Tournament after years of falling just one win shy of the state tournament. This year it was Mayer Lutheran that sent the Knights home early, as the Crusaders avenged last year's loss with a 58-41 win over Sleepy Eye St. Mary's in the Section 2A Championship March 11.

"It's crazy, we're all so excited," Emma Lade said. "There's no better way to get to the state tournament than beating the team that you lost to last year."

Last year, the Knights built a 31-20 lead by halftime, and though the Crusaders managed to score 47 points in the second half, they were unable to cut into the lead enough to rally for the win, as the lead allowed Sleepy Eye St. Mary's to control the game. This time around, Mayer Lutheran took control with an early 8-1 run to build a 17-9 lead, with the Knights not getting any closer than six points the rest of the game.

"There's a sense of complete joy because they beat us last year and now we got to come back and play our game how we wanted to," said Julia Carns.

It was Carns who found the early success for Mayer Lutheran, scoring eight quick points to give the Crusaders an early lead while forcing a timeout from the Knights.

"We work a lot on high-lows because we do have that height advantage," Carns said. "So it wasn't so much myself,



although it happened to be this game, it's looking inside, getting those good shots because we have long arms. We're going to look for that every time."

With Carns drawing attention down low, Madeline Guetzkow started to find holes in the defense, hitting a three-pointer before a couple of drives for easy layups for seven quick points. The duo accounted for 17 of Mayer Lutheran's first 23 points, as the Knights focused on the Crusaders' leading scorer Emma Lade, holding her to just two points for much of the opening half.

"They defended her well and teams are going to do that, but ultimately our goal is the team, and our team is here to win," said coach Kris Gustin. "That's about who is going to step up in big moments, and early on it was the two bigs. Emma made a couple layups and those are big shots for us. Emma is our best scorer, our

leading scorer, but our talls stepped up for us this year and Madeline had a nice game for us."

And while Sleepy Eye St. Mary's looked to limit the Crusaders' top scorer, Mayer Lutheran was doing the opposite, opting to let the state's No. 1 scorer (34.9 points per game) get her points while focusing on everyone else.

"We knew Madison was going to score, that was not our main goal - stopping her," said Lade. "Our main goal was stopping [the other players] because when they're on and scoring a lot, they're going to win the game."

Mayer Lutheran's game plan worked as the Knights shot just 31.5 percent from the field, with only their top scorer recording more than six points. The Crusaders held a team that scored more than 70 points per game to just 45 total points in the most important game of the year.

"We prepped so much for this game, so it real-

ly paid off with how we played," said Guetzkow.

Also taking a toll on the Knights' offense was the work they had to do at the other end. Mayer Lutheran was patient on offense, making the Knights chase them around the court for long stretches of play.

"We talked about valuing the ball all the time, and even the possessions where we turned the ball over, it's still 50 seconds, it's a minute and they're having to work hard to get the ball back," said Gustin. "Those are keys for us, the possessions where you come down and make a bad pass in the first one or two passes, that's killer for us where they don't have to work."

It not only paid off in tiring out the opposition, but the Crusaders shot with high efficiency from the field, netting 55.6 percent of their shots.

"Being slow and patient is better than fast and out of control," said Guetzkow. "We just

had to take care of the ball."

Mayer Lutheran's patience factored into other areas of the game to keep the Knights from rallying. Basketball is usually a game of runs, but the Crusaders never allowed the Knights to go on one. Mayer Lutheran slowly built a lead while Sleepy Eye St. Mary's was never able to get any momentum.

"I kind of felt when we were up seven or so late in the first half, and I looked at [coach] Pol-ding and I said, 'We're just going to keep building this lead,'" Gustin said. "They have the capability of making a run, even if its just [their top player], but they're not a full court pressure team. She's a smart player, she gets steals off of rebounds, so we're securing a rebounding and not looking for outlet passes. Ultimately we thought we could grind away at them and you could see that they were tired at the end of the first half and certainly in the second half."

While the Knights were tired, the Crusaders were fresh down the stretch, leading by as much as 17 and as little as 12.

"We have a deep bench, so anyone can come off the bench and play and we'll be fine," said Guetzkow. "Everyone single person on the court knew their role and they executed it almost perfectly."

STATS

Julia Carns led the team in scoring with 16 and was followed by Madeline Guetzkow (15), Emma Lade (12), Lilly Wachholz (6), Danica Martin (5) and Rylee Noerenberg (4).

Carns led the team in rebounding and earned a double-double with 10 rebounds, and was followed by Danica Martin (7), Wachholz (5), Lade (4), Maass (3), Noerenberg (2) and Guetzkow (2).

Carns led the team in assists with five and was followed by Lade (4), Wachholz (3), Danica Martin (3) and Guetzkow (2).

Lade and Guetzkow each had two steals, while Carns had three blocks.

CLASS A STATE TOURNAMENT

The Crusaders earned the No. 2 seed for the Class A State Tournament, taking on United Christian Academy March 17 at the Maturi Pavilion-U of M, with tipoff set for 3 p.m. The winner takes on either No. 3 Hancock or Nevis March 18 at Williams Arena, with tipoff set for 2 p.m. The championship is set for March 19 at Williams Arena, with tipoff at noon. The other half of the bracket is No. 1 Mountain Iron Buhl vs. Minneota and No. 4 Cass Lake-Bena vs. No. 5 Hayfield.

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