

Defense wins championships for Lady Warriors in the CIC tournament

By Lenny Sementi

It's an old saying, but in the end it's almost always true.

You can have a bad night shooting or be unable to find the open player, but if the effort and the knowledge to adjust during the game is there, defense never takes a night off. Head coach Tim Kohlbecker along with his assistants Lydia Miller and Justin Quick and their Lady Warriors ended a great week of basketball on top of the podium at the Central Illinois Conference Tournament at St. Teresa.

The Warriors rose to the top from the fifth seed, avenging an earlier loss to Clinton in the opener 43-38, then knocked off the state's third ranked Sullivan Lady Redskins in the semis 38-34. All of that was before avenging yet another loss by dropping state ranked Central A&M 44-43 in a championship thriller. Kohlbecker and his crew continued their dominance on the defensive end of the court and shut down one of the top offensives in Central Illinois.

The Warriors limited the Lady Raiders to just 12 points after the break, shutting them out in the entire third quarter. Brynn Tabelaing donated a game high five steals to the cause, three of which came in the final 16 minutes of action. Natalie Bates and Grace Dietrich joined her out front, each finding their ways to three steals, while Lexie Russo patrolled the paint picking off four steals in the contest.

Russo turned in a double-double adding 13 rebounds and 13 points to her season stat list. She was good on 5 of 6 from the line, none more important than the final four



Photo: Tracy Hornaday

Tuscola's Brynn Tabelaing gets low on defense during the Central Illinois Conference championship game against Central A&M Friday, Jan. 25.

in the last minute of the game. She twice tied it up and put the Warriors in front in the final 60 seconds, the last two coming with just four seconds left on the clock. A&M quickly inbounded the ball and attempted a half court pass, but Abbey Jacob had other ideas coming away with the ball to set off the postgame celebration.

"I saw Abbey break in front of the pass, and I honestly quit watching, I knew she would stop the pass and

not allow them a shot," commented Coach Kohlbecker. "She gave us some great minutes down the stretch."

Dietrich was 3 for 3 from outside the arc in the first five minutes of the game, and Bates hit a three as well, but a 21-point effort from the Raiders powered them in front by seven, 21-14, after one. The two teams traded points throughout the second with the Warriors adding two more to the board than the second seed entering the break behind by five, 31-

26. Both Ashton Smith and Marissa Russo came up big with buckets and shots in arm off the bench. Russo ended her night with three points and five rebounds.

"When Ashton comes

into a game she automatically energizes our defense with her communication, and she is always in the right spot," quipped the coach. "She is also our most physical player and best screener and tonight she hit a huge shot in the second quarter when we were making a run."

Coach K. slapped on the man-to-man defense in the third and reaped the benefits as his frontcourt harassed the Raiders in nearly double-digit turnovers while shutting them out on the board. The Warriors managed to score just eight points in the period, but it was more than enough to erase the five point deficit while also building a lead of their own entering the fourth on top by three 34-31.

"They were prepared for our zone and caught us with a few slow rotations in the first and second quarters," stated Kohlbecker. "We can put pressure on the ball with our guards, and that's what we decided to do in the second half."

A&M took the lead three times in the final stanza, but the Warriors' effort on the defensive end never waned, despite Bates fouling out midway through the quarter. Tabelaing appeared to be everywhere after the senior guard departed, barely allowing the Raiders to breath. Dietrich and Jacob turned up the heat out front as well, and Lexie Russo was just as

strong around the basket. Jacob and Sophia Kremetzki both had big buckets late, and Lexie Russo sealed the deal on the win at the line. Eight players in all scored for Tuscola in the victory. Jacob's was the result of a great feed from Tabelaing who notched five assists in the contest.

No one saw this coming entering the week. Tuscola entered the tourney with a 2-3 mark in the league and left it with their 20th win and moved to 20-3 overall. This title run started on Dec. 12 the day after the Raiders hung 64 points on the Warriors. Since that time not one team has scored more than 45 points in a game against the vaunted black swarm defense that has allowed just seven teams to score more than 40 points in 26 outings.

It was the fourth CIC Championship game for the seniors and their second title. The team is strong top to bottom and would not be winning games without the entire program.

Kohlbecker commented to as much saying, "We don't win without out everyone that comes to practice everyday. They get us prepared. When you see pictures of the excitement on the bench it speaks volumes about how unselfish this group is and the character of the program. Next woman up, and when their times come they will be ready."

Experience shows the way to win

By Lenny Sementi

Seniors Natalie Bates, Lexie Russo and Grace Dietrich provided the offensive punch needed, and the rest of the Lady Warriors joined in on defense helping coach Tim Kohlbecker's squad to advance to the title tilt of the Central Illinois Conference Tournament. The Warriors were stingy limiting both Clinton and Sullivan to under 40-points.

Grace Dietrich's offensive contribution this season has been picking up steam as the post-season approaches, and in the opener of the CIC tourney it was on full display. She led the charge as the fifth seeded Warriors avenged an earlier loss to Clinton by scoring 16 points en-route to a 43-38 win over the fourth seeded Maroons Monday the 20th. Russo was strong in the scoring department, as well, ending the night with 11 points.

The two teams went back and forth the entire first half and ended up knotted at 16 apiece at the buzzer. Clinton rode a short run late in the third to pull in front by three entering the fourth only to watch Dietrich hit stride. The senior drilled an early three, her second of the game, then found her way to the free throw line three times going 6 for 6 from the charity stripe, which fueled a 17-point final frame securing the win with nine points of her own. Russo had a pair of buckets in the frame, and

Bates finished off a runner and dished out two assists. The duo produced 25 points, 13 rebounds, 10 steals, and two assists.

Bates delivered 20 points a few nights later on Wednesday as the Warriors notched win number two of the tourney and dropped top seeded and state ranked Sullivan 38-34. The Redskins entered the skirmish ranked third in Class 2A riding a 17-game winning streak and boasting a 21-1 record overall. Bates was good on 9 of 13 from the floor, including a three.

The Warriors' smothering defense limited the top seed to their lowest point total of the year by six points, 24 points under their season average.

"As always our guards cause other teams problems with their tenacity," stated the coach. "Brynn (Tabelaing) and Natalie are extremely strong, and Grace's defense is getting better every game. Lexie did a great job in the paint against their big girls."

Bates started strong against Sullivan and never slowed down. The fourth year varsity player was per-

fect in the first scoring nine points on a 4-for-4 effort from the field including one from outside the arc. Bates added two more buckets in the second, and Dietrich drained a three as the Warriors went into the break down by one 19-18. It was more of the same after the break with the two area heavyweights trading blows, but a late run fueled by Bates, Dietrich and Russo put the Warriors in front by five heading to the fourth up 31-26.

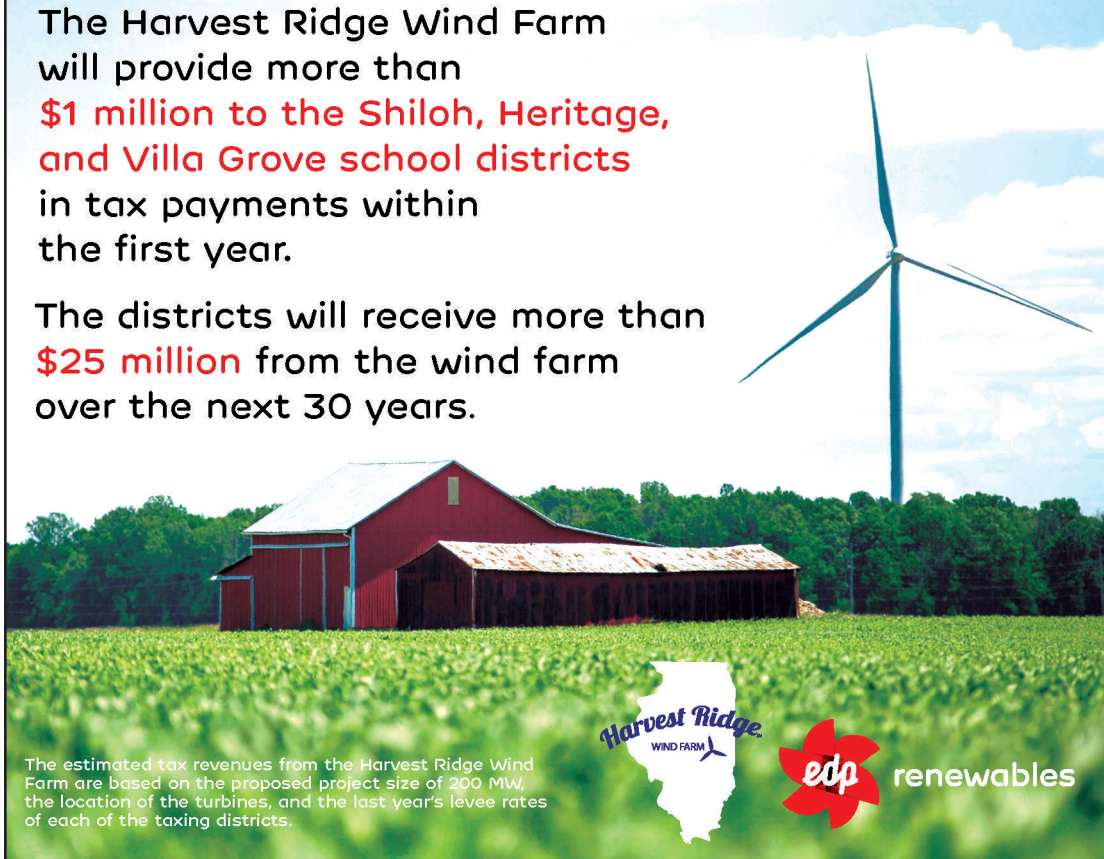
"Natalie put us on her back tonight," stated the coach. "She refused to let us lose, her and Grace never left the floor. This team never stops fighting, I couldn't be more proud of them."

Tabelaing also had a big basket in the third frame and another in the final period earning Kohlbecker's crew a spot in the finals and yet another shot at redemption. The Lady Warriors played Central A&M in the championship. The Lady Raiders beat Tuscola in early December but since that time Tuscola has won 14 of their last 16 games.

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Dinner 6 pm with Concert at 7pm

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Deadline for dinner tickets is Wed. Feb. 13
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