

SPORTS



AHS GIRLS BASKETBALL - Junior Jacey Kessler (10) in the last varsity game of the regular season played on Monday, Feb. 9. Arcola lost to Neoga 51-50. Photo by Nancy Rairden.



AHS GIRLS BASKETBALL - Freshman Ema Simpson (15) in a junior varsity game played on Monday, Feb. 9. Arcola lost to Neoga in a shortened game where they played two quarters. Photo by Nancy Rairden.



AHS GIRLS BASKETBALL - Junior Kelsey Moore (11) tries to take a shot in the last varsity game of the regular season played on Monday, Feb. 9. Arcola lost the non-conference game to Neoga 51-50. Photo by Nancy Rairden.

Arcola holds off Central A&M 46-40 advances to regional championship game

By Mike Monahan

ARCOLA—The first time the Arcola girls' basketball team played Central A&M the Lady Riders won 46-37 on Nov. 28. This time the two met in the Class 1A regional semifinals Monday at Nancy Stiff Gymnasium.

Arcola entered the game making just 230-of-441 .522, but after making just 2 of its first 9 in the opening half, they sank 11-of-15 .733 in the second half, including making all eight in the final 2:25 to help them to a 46-40.

"That was big," said Arcola senior Eva Hopkins. "We actually made the free throws, which was good. We set a goal to shoot 65 percent in the second half and I think we got that (.733)."

Arcola, 22-8, moves into a tie for the sixth most wins in a season with the 2013-14 team that went 22-5.

"That is crazy," said Hopkins. "We definitely have put in a lot of work this season and it shows in our record and is something special to be a part of."

The Lady Riders take on fellow Lincoln Prairie Conference foe, Tri-County, a team that is 23-6 and have won 10 straight games. The two teams played Jan. 23 at Arcola with the Lady Titans

winning 53-23. Game time is set for 7 p.m. Friday.

In the final regular season game last Thursday Arcola struggled shooting, making just 6-of-41 from the field in a 39-25 loss to the No. 8 team in Class 1A, Neoga, a team that entered regional play with a 28-3 record.

Neoga finished 29-8 last year and placed third in the Class 1A state tournament.

Arcola 46, Central A&M 40

Arcola never led by more than nine points and Central A&M never led until a three-pointer from NBA range by Jilyan Burgener for a 33-32 lead with 6:32 remaining in the game.

Arcola regained the lead on a three-pointer by Jacey Kessler with 5:23 left.

"The play of the game was when we were up 33-32 and there was a scramble for the ball and Kessler made a 3-pointer," said Central A&M coach Brent Weakly. "That was kind of a deflating play for us. We had a chance, but just could not find a way to get our momentum back. We got something going and that play took something away from us."

Although Arcola never trailed again it was tied at 35

and 37. Gwyn Hardimon's free throws with 3:18 left tied it for the fourth and final time.

Moore made one of two free throws as the Lady Riders took a lead they would not relinquish.

Arcola's man-to-man defense held Central A&M, a member of the Central Illinois Conference, to just 2-of-10 in the final 6:32.

With former coach Nancy Stiff in attendance Sisk, Hopkins, Moore and Sisk again made eight straight free throws.

"Grit wise and toughness wise it was probably our best game," said Arcola coach Corey Roberts. "I will put that to having two tough games late (Arthur-Lovington-Atwood-Hammond and Neoga) that challenged us and got us ready for this game. We are on the floor, getting the loose balls and we rebounded well and made our shots tonight as well as our free throws when it counted."

Arcola started the game well, scoring the first nine points, including four by Kessler.

"I feel like there were a lot of nerves coming into the game because it is a regional game," said Hopkins. "You never know when it is going to be your last. It was a good con-

fidence booster."

Sisk led the way with 12 points and Kessler was also in double digits with 11 points.

The first time the two teams played Burgener had 29 points and Monday she finished with 13.

"Hopkins held her to a hard 13 points and two of those were from four feet beyond the three-point line. She made her shoot tough shots."

Central A&M finished 18-13 as they doubled their win total from last season. Leading the way for the Lady Raiders were Burgener with 13 and Gwyn Hardimon had 10 points.

The first time Arcola faced the Lady Raiders, who won the Macon County Tournament, they also shot free throws well, sinking 21-of-28.

"I am really proud of our kids," said Weakly. "Our kids have matured a lot and I am thankful for the seniors (Julia Corzine and Jayne Damery) allowing me to coach them. They are great people and I hope my girls grow up like those two."

Arcola earned it today. A few misses here and there, missed layups and missed free throws gets you beat in a game like this."

Central A&M was 2-of-9

from the free throw line.

Thomas led Arcola in rebounds with 11 as the Lady Riders won the rebound battle 36-28.

Neoga 39, Arcola 25

The game was tied for the only time at five when Neoga scored 12 unanswered points in a span of 5:58 as Sydney Richards scored eight of the points, including one on a pass from Sydney Hakman.

Arcola closed the gap to six as Kessler made a 3-pointer, Moore made a free throw and Thomas's basket made it 17-11. Richards ended the 6-0 Arcola with a basket and the Lady Indians led 21-11 at halftime.

"It was a slow start for both teams," said Neoga coach Kim Romack. "We were finally able to make a little bit of a run late in the first half and led by 10 at halftime. It was a tough

night to score for both sides. It was the way the game was played and both teams are physical."

Sisk ended a 10-1 Neoga run, which included a basket by Brynn Richards on a pass from Sydney Richards. Sisk's basket made it 25-14 with 3:30 left in the third.

Neoga, who played a 1-2-2 for the most part and some man-to-man and their height and length helped hold Arcola to not more than two field goals in a quarter.

"We were able to get some shots to fall in the second half and we took care of the ball a little bit and sealed the deal," said Romack. "We had some looks inside and Allison Sampson hit some shots from the outside and that helps to pull teams (Arcola played man-to-man) out a little bit and they can't just focus on

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AHS GIRLS BASKETBALL - Senior Makenzie Thomas (20) fights for possession under the basket in the last varsity game of the regular season played on Monday, Feb. 9. Arcola lost the non-conference game to Neoga 51-50. Photo by Nancy Rairden.



AHS GIRLS BASKETBALL - Sophomore Crystal Ramirez (14) looks for a shot in a junior varsity game played on Monday, Feb. 9. Arcola lost to Neoga in a shortened game where they played two quarters. Photo by Nancy Rairden.



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