

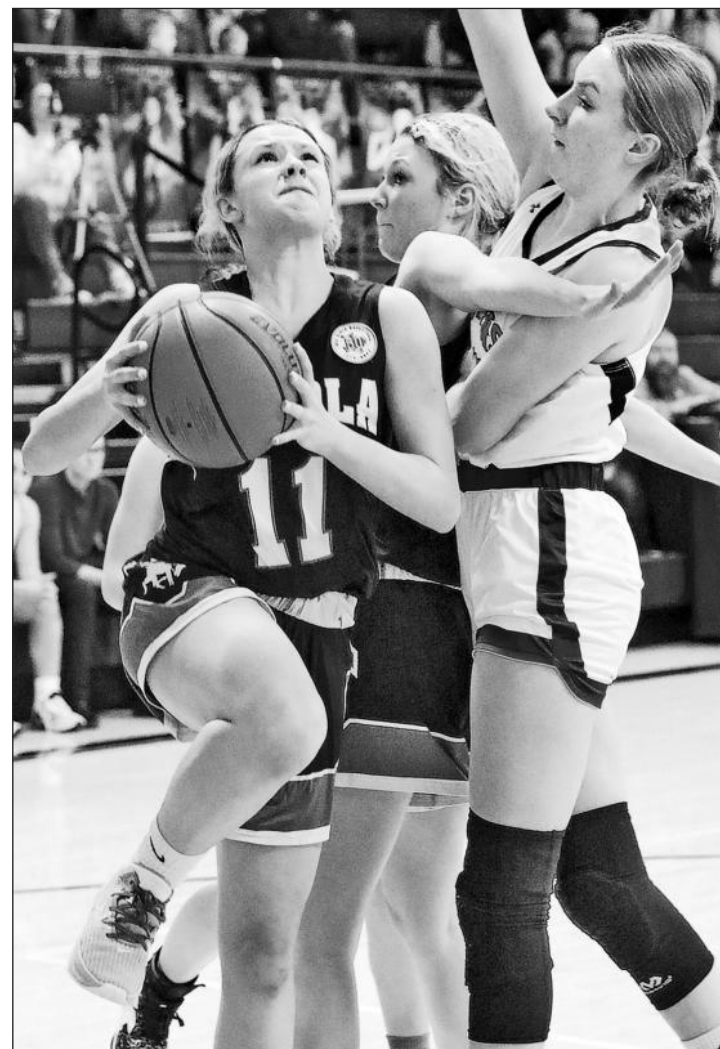
SPORTS



JUNIOR JACEY KESSLER (10) looks to pass to a teammate in the championship game of the Regional Tournament hosted by Arcola on Friday, Feb 17. Arcola lost to Tri-County 47-39. Photo by Nancy Rairden.



SOPHOMORE KACIE SISK (23) takes a shot in the championship game of the Regional Tournament hosted by Arcola on Friday, Feb 17. Arcola lost to Tri-County 47-39. Photo by Nancy Rairden.



JUNIOR KELSEY MOORE (11) gets in position for a shot while her teammate senior Makenzie Thomas (20) holds off a defender from Tri-County. Arcola fell to Tri-County 47-39 in a hard fought championship game of the Regional Tournament hosted by Arcola on Friday, Feb 17. Photo by Nancy Rairden.

Lady Riders battle No. 17 Tri-County, fall 47-39 in regional championship

By Mike Monahan

ARCOLA - Jan. 23 Tri-County beat Arcola 53-23 in a Lincoln Prairie Conference girls' basketball game. Last Friday the two met again this time with a Class 1A regional title on the line at Nancy Stiff Gymnasium.

This time it was a lot closer. Although Arcola never led they never trailed by more than nine points. The last time the Lady Riders trailed by nine was with 2:21 left in the game, 41-32. Arcola outscored the Lady Titans, a team that entered the game with a 24-6 record and won the LPC regular season and tournament titles, 7-1 over a span of 1:39 to climb to within three for the third time in the contest. However, Arcola didn't get the ball back to have a chance to tie and Kaylin Williams made a pair of free throws with 31 seconds left and that started the final five points of the game. Tri-County won its sixth straight regional (no regional in 2020-21 due to COVID) and third straight over Arcola, 47-39.

The Lady Riders have been getting closer to beating Tri-County in regional championship games, falling to them by 39 (70-31) in 2018-19 and 24 (58-34) in 2022-2023 and now just eight points.

What did Arcola do differently from the first time they faced them this season?

"We did a better job of attacking their defense compared to the first time we played them," said Arcola coach Corey Roberts. "Defensively, we had Eva Hopkins face guard Josie Armstrong (averaged a team-high 16.8 points per game prior to the contest). The first game we switched and didn't face guard as we were still in help. Hopkins did a tremendous job. Armstrong only had nine points after scoring 17 the first game. We got her in foul trouble too. We attacked their zone and got to the basket and had our posts cutting down for layup opportunities."

Armstrong, a 5-6 junior guard, had three fouls in the first quarter, but didn't foul out until late in the game.



SENIOR MAKENZIE THOMAS (20) goes in for a layup in the first round of the Regional Tournament hosted by Arcola on Monday, Feb 13. Arcola defeated Central A&M 46-40 to advance to the championship game on Friday, Feb. 17. Photo by Nancy Rairden.

One thing that was the same as the first game is that Arcola did force the Lady Titans to pull off their press.

"That is a big part of what they do and who they are," said Roberts of their press that normally caused opponents to turn the ball over. "They went to a 2-3 zone after the first couple of minutes."

Tri-County started out on fire, sinking 6 of its first 9 shots from the field, taking a 17-10 lead after the first quarter and at one time leading 12-4. Lake land bound Thaylee Barry sank a 3-pointer for the eight point advantage before Arcola's Jacey Kessler ended the 9-2 run with a 3-pointer. The Lady Titans, the No. 17 team in the final Associated Press rankings, led 23-16 after a bucket by Armstrong. Kelsey Moore made a 3-pointer, Williams made a basket and Moore drained the fourth 3-pointer of the first half for Arcola, making it a 3-point game. However, a steal and layup by Barry prevented the Lady Riders from getting any closer.

"They were making shots early," said Roberts. "In the second quarter we got going.

When they are going to play zone you have to be able to knock down those shots (3-pointers) and we did in the first half for sure."

Arcola got to within three again as senior Makenzie Thomas started the second half with a putback for a 27-24 deficit. The low scoring third quarter, which had 10 points only combined, saw Lainey Ehlers pushed the lead back to five and Williams found an open Kenzie Hales for two and a 31-24 advantage.

"In the third quarter a lot of shots were not falling, but there was good defense out there as well," said Roberts as the two teams combined to go 4-of-17 from the field.

A putback by Williams, who led Tri-County with 13 points, made it 35-26. Kacie Sisk, a sophomore, who finished with a double-double (12 point and 12 rebounds) for Arcola, had a putback of her own and Kessler drained a 3-pointer for a 35-31 contest.

Tri-County answered as Armstrong found an open Hales for two on back-to-back plays for a 39-31 advantage. After a free throw by Sisk, Armstrong

scored for the final nine point lead.

"I feel like the last couple of games we have been the aggressor as we outrebounded other teams (26-23 Friday) and got the loose balls. We struggled early in the year and we got better later in the year. We did a great job and our kids battled."

Hopkins and Sisk made two free throws each for a 41-36 game with 1:14 remaining. After a free throw by Barry Sisk sank a 3-pointer from the top of the key bringing the Arcola crowd into a frenzy as it was 42-39 with still 41.1 left.

Tri-County made half of its eight free throw attempts in the final 30 seconds, while Arcola missed its last two field goal attempts.

"We guarded them and we were not going to foul them yet," said Roberts. "We let it get down to 30 and then started fouling. They made their free throws when it counted."

Tri-County was 11-of-20 from the free throw line compared to 7-of-9 for Arcola.

Kessler was also in double digits for Arcola with 11 points.

Tri-County shot 40 percent from the field compared to 30 percent for the Lady Riders.

"Credit to the kids for continuing to get better throughout the year and do the little things," said Roberts. "It was pretty much a complete game from the aspect of the things we were not doing well earlier in the year to here as of late when we were doing the things we were not doing well early. It was a team effort today. We had expectations of ourselves and there were probably not a lot of people that thought we would be in that game, but our kids did. We played hard and that is all you can ask for."

At times the crowd was so loud that it was hard for the Arcola players to talk and hear each other.

"On defense we switch everything and with that environment it was hard for our kids to talk and hear each other on defense because it was so loud. There were a couple of times we got burned

on switches or them stealing it for layups. It was a great environment. The community really came out and supported us.

We had six seniors (Thomas, Hopkins, Reyli Vega, Alessia Menoud, Vanessa Condarco, and Emma Vazquez) and they are all leaders. It was good for our younger kids to have them as seniors. Forty wins in two years, that is good stuff to hang your hat on. They are good kids. The girls really bought into this year. We continued to get better and better. We didn't just let the season pass on when things were going bad."

Tri-County 17 10 6 14-47
Arcola 10 12 4 13-39

ARCOLA: Eva Hopkins 0-2-2, Jacey Kessler 4-0-11, Kesley Moore 2-0-6, Makenzie Thomas 4-0-8, Kacie Sisk 3-5-12, Reyli Vega 0-0-0, Crystal Ramirez 0-0-0, Totals 13-7-39

3-point goals: Arcola 6-20 .300 (Kessler 3-6, Moore 2-5, Sisk 1-2, Hopkins 0-7), Tri-County 2-6 (Thaylee Barry 1-5, Josie Armstrong 1-1). Rebounds: Arcola 26 (Sisk 12), Tri-County 23 (Kaylin Williams 7).

Turnovers: Arcola 18, Tri-County 21. Bench points: Arcola 0, Tri-County 2. Free throws: Arcola 7-9 (.728), Tri-County 11-20 (.550). Field goals percentage: Arcola 13-44 (.295), Tri-County 17-43 (.395).

2023 Class 1A Regional, Arcola

(Seeds and records in parentheses)

Saturday

Game 1: Okaw Valley 51, Meridian (9, 6-22) 43

Game 2: Central A&M 54, Heritage 11, 1-19) 13

Monday

Game 3: Tri-County 53, Okaw Valley (8, 10-21) 30

Game 4: Arcola 46, Central A&M (6, 18-13) 40

Friday, Feb. 17

Game 5: Tri-County 47, Arcola (3, 22-9) 39, Tri-County (2, 24-6) advances to the Casey-Westfield Sectional vs. Neoga (1, 30-3) winner of Neoga regional.

Top seasons by wins in Arcola girls history

- 1983-84 28-1
- 1982-83 26-3
- 1984-85, 1981-82 25-3
- 1993-94 24-1
- 1986-87, 2013-14, 2022-23 22-5, 22-9
- 2014-15, 1988-89 21-8, 21-7
- 2011-12, 1998-99 20-4

Arcola eighth grade tops Windsor in volleyball

By Mike Monahan

WINDSOR - The Arcola eighth grade volleyball team downed Windsor Monday after losing the first set. Arcola won 18-25, 25-23, 25-12 to improve to 2-8.

The seventh grade dropped a 25-23, 25-17 decision to the Trojans, falling to 0-10.

It was their first games in over a week.

The two teams played at Argenta-Oreana Tuesday and travel to Oakland Thursday for the final regular season matches.

The seventh grade, the sixth seeded team, plays at Decatur Our Lady of Lourdes at 10:15 a.m. Saturday in the Class 2A regional quarterfinals.

Arcola Sports through March 1

High school boys basketball

Friday
If Arcola won Wednesday play for Class 1A regional championship at Tuscola, 7 p.m.

Saturday
Arcola at St. Joseph-Ogden freshmen, 10:15 a.m.

Monday
Arcola at St. Joseph-Ogden freshmen, 6 p.m.

Junior high volleyball

Thursday
Arcola at Oakland vs. Tri-County, 6 p.m.

Saturday
Arcola at Decatur Our Lady of Lourdes, 6:15 p.m. seventh grade Class 2A regional

Monday
If Arcola wins Saturday vs. Decatur Montessori Academy for Peace, 6 45 p.m. at Decatur Our Lady of Lourdes in Class 2A regional semifinals