

SPORTS

Arcola boys advance to regional semifinals

By Mike Monahan

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ARCOLA -The Class 1A regional semifinals played Wednesday between two Lincoln Prairie Conference teams, Okaw Valley and Arcola, had the Purple Riders entering on a three-game winning streak.

Arcola won the regional quarterfinal game at Nancy Stiff Gymnasium over Georgetown Notre Dame de La Salette 50-41 Saturday after ending the regular season with a 66-48 win over Arthur-Lovington-Atwood-Hammond followed by a 66-

39 triumph over Heritage in the final LPC game of the season. The Purple Riders guaranteed themselves of a winning season with the victory over Heritage and entered the semifinal game with a 16-13 mark. The Timberwolves entered with a 17-12 record, which included a 54-39 win over Arcola earlier this season. Okaw Valley is coached by former Arcola and Mattoon coach Brooks Inman, an Okaw Valley grad.

"Our season is going to come to an end at some point," said Arcola coach Greg Gisinger, who is 65-62 in his

sixth season. "It may be Wednesday. It may be Friday. I don't know, but we are just having a ton of fun playing basketball and playing together. This group is so much fun to coach. They are resilient tough kids and they are fun to be around. We don't want it to end, but when it does, we are going to be really happy with the progress that we have made this year. It makes me even more excited for next season. But we are not ready to be done. We are going to this regional to win it. That is our goal and we are going to do the best we can to get it done."

Okaw Valley had a three-game winning streak as well before the game Wednesday.

"I have said it before and it is like a broken record, but I don't know if I have been more proud of a basketball team in my 18 years of coaching than this group than I have right now."

Arcola 50, Georgetown Notre Dame de La Salette 41

La Salette, a team coached by John Spezia (a former Milford coach and Danville Area Community College coach where he guided his team to a national title in 1991 and he is a member of the NJCAA Hall of Fame (inducted in 2008) had a 6-16 record prior to the contest, but one of the losses was to Neoga by just nine points (a team Arcola lost to by 11).

"They are very well coached," said Gisinger. "They are very fundamental and physical."

The game was deadlocked for the third and final time at 10 when the Lions went on a 9-1 run in a span of 3:17 for a 19-11 advantage with 5:45 left in the first half. The run included five points by Matt Romero.

Arcola then reeled off the final 13 points of the first half in the final 5:34 and extended it to 15-0 as Jackson Miller found Braden Phillips for two

to open the second half.

The pivotal run started with back-to-back 3-pointers by Ryan Lindstrom.

"We have kind of been waiting on it (Lindstrom) he can shoot," said Gisinger. "He can really shoot the ball. He just has to have his confidence up and he just waited until regional time to make four 3-pointers (accounting for all 12 of his points)."

As for the 13-0 run Gisinger said, "I think it is a testament to this whole season of this team. People in the stands were probably really worried when we were down eight and we were not playing very well. They ran some junk defenses that we haven't seen this year. We were a little off early. The team is so resilient. They have done it all year."

Miller scored the final seven points of the half and his basket with 1:30 left gave Arcola the lead for good. The Purple Riders led 24-19 at the half and 33-27 after three.

In the fourth Miller hit a 3-pointer and after two free throws by La Salette's Eamon Martin, canned another one for a 39-29 lead.

"I think 14 (Miller) is a good player," said Spezia. "He hit the two three's in the fourth quarter and that hurt us. If he doesn't hit those two then it is a 2-3 point ball game."

Gerardo Alanis also made a 3-pointer for a 42-29 lead. The Lions pulled back to within seven, 42-35 after two consecutive 3-pointers by Martin. That is when Lindstrom made his final 3-pointer and La Salette didn't get closer than seven the rest of the way.

"He has done a good job here," said Spezia. "He has a good young team coming. We had to take Martin out (foul trouble) and that didn't help (in the first half). The guys that came in made a couple of turnovers in out of bounds plays and that should not happen at this stage of the game."

Spezia said they ran a box-one as well as a triangle-two and man-to-man, which he said looks like a zone.



ARCOLA HIGH SCHOOL BOYS BASKETBALL - Junior Ryan Lindstrom (00) shoots for a 3-point basket in the first round of a Regional Tournament game played at Arcola on Sat., Feb. 18. The varsity defeated La Salette Academy from Georgetown 50-41. The Riders advanced to a second round game to be played at Tuscola on Wed., Feb. 22 where Arcola will take on Okaw Valley. Photo by Nancy Rairden.

"We struggled all season long in scoring," said Spezia. "We don't finish shots or don't make good decisions. We forced a couple of shots that we should not have. Our team is mainly juniors and sophomores as our seniors have not played much at all. They have played on the junior varsity level."

Both Miller and Phillips had 16 points for Arcola.

"I thought it might be Jackson's most complete game," said Gisinger. "They played a box and one on him early and then we put him inside as we tried to get the ball inside and rebound. In the past as a sophomore and a freshman he would have not done that, but as a junior he is willing to go in there and bang and use his length to score on top of people. Alanis rebounded the ball well and had some

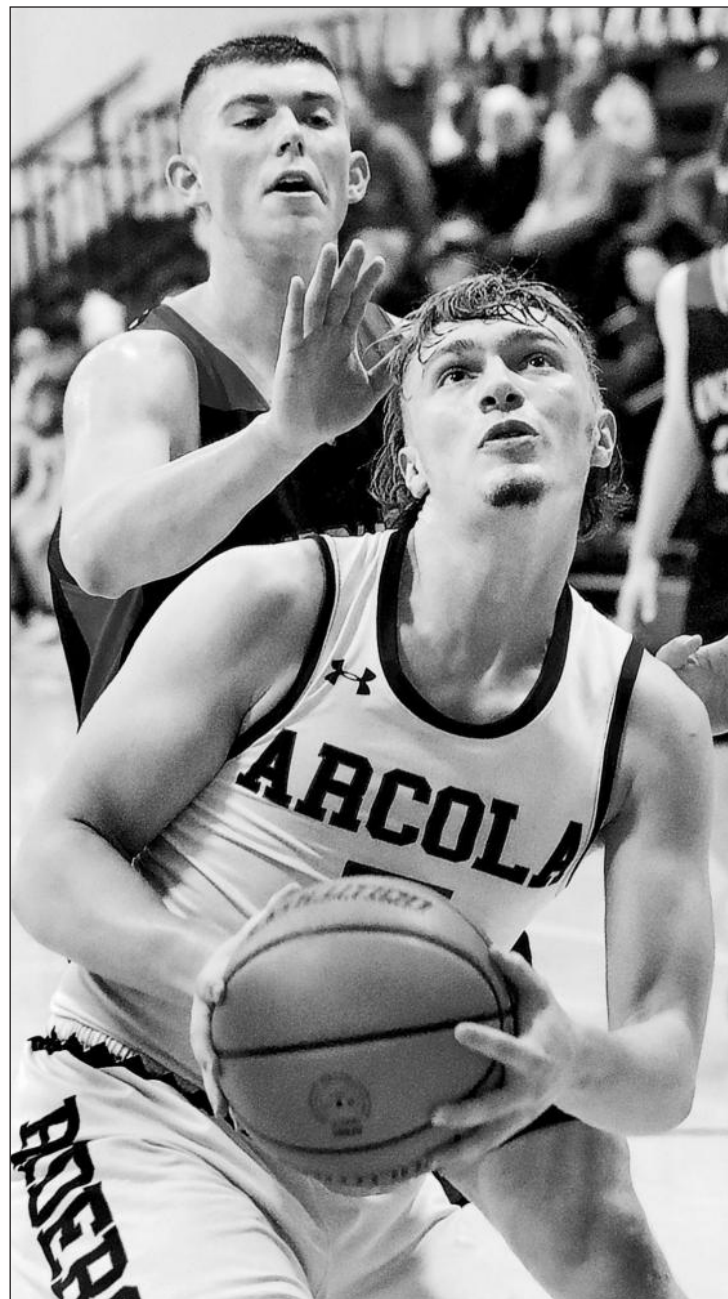
good passes and Tyson Lewis played fantastic defense, getting loose balls. It was a complete team effort and I think that run was huge."

Martin led La Salette, a private all boys school, who had a big boisterous student section, with 17 points.

"They shot the ball better than I have seen them shoot in all of the films I have watched," said Gisinger of the Lions, who were 37 percent from both the field and the three-point line (made seven). "Hats off to them for making some big shots. They kept coming at us. We could get up 10-12 points and they would keep coming at us."

Arcola 66, Heritage 39

Arcola started strong, scoring 16 of the first 20 points



ARCOLA HIGH SCHOOL BOYS BASKETBALL - Junior Tyson Lewis (5) eyes the basket to take a shot in a varsity game played at Arcola on Feb. 14. The Purple Riders defeated the ALAH Knights 66-48 in the final game of the regular season. Photo by Nancy Rairden.

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