

Bullitt Central, Moore to meet in district final

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SPORTS EDITOR

SHEPHERDSVILLE – In a district tournament with the top four teams separated by just a few points, anything can happen on a given night.

That given night was Tuesday as the semifinals were contested at Bullitt Central. When the dust had finally settled, it was Bullitt Central and Moore that found a way to advance to Thursday's 23rd District final to be played on the Cougars' home court.

Bullitt Central was the number four seed in the crowded field and had already beaten Southern in the 'play-in' game two days earlier to get to the semifinals. But the way the seedings fell, the Cougars were paired against top-seeded North Bullitt, a team that the Cougars had beaten twice during the regular season.

As will be mentioned many times in the upcoming NCAA basketball tournament, matchups are everything. North Bullitt is a very good team, having beaten both Moore and Bullitt East on the road this season. However, the Eagles just do not line up well against Bullitt Central's bigger lineup.

Bullitt Central scored the last 10 points of the first half, including back-to-back three-pointers from Trevor Carnes and then A.J. Lee at the buzzer to surge ahead 24-21. With two more three-pointers to start the second half as part of eight-point run to open the third quarter, Bullitt Central led by 13 points to seize control of the contest.

North Bullitt could get no closer than five points the rest of the way as the Cougars moved to 11-0 at home this season with a 53-37 victory.

In the second semifinal it appeared that Bullitt East's offensive limitations this season would bring a quick end to the season as Moore moved ahead by 24 points at 46-22 two minutes into the second half.

But the Chargers did not quit. The red and gold battled back and twice pulled within three points, the last at 66-63 with just under two minutes to play. Moore kept attacking the basket and scored just often enough to win 73-67.

Bullitt Central and Moore will clash in the championship game at 7 p.m. on Thursday in the Cougars' den. The Cougars are 10-1 since losing to Moore on the road on January 23 by a 66-64 count.

BC Shuts Down Eagles

In the two regular season meetings, Bullitt Central had gotten the best of the Eagles by 20 points in December and then by 10 points three weeks ago. Only six times during the season did North Bullitt fail to score at least 52 points and three of those times were against Bullitt Central. That tally included two of the three times the Eagles failed to score at least 40 points.

Bullitt Central just has the players at the right spots to contain North Bullitt's top two scoring threats – sophomore Nathan Bott and senior Jordan McKinney. Both of those players scored at least five points below their



Bullitt East's Drake Mefford flies toward the basket against Moore.



Bullitt Central's Trevor Carnes looks to score against North Bullitt in the District 23 semifinal victory Tuesday.

averages this season on Tuesday.

"We talked about it all week," Bullitt Central head coach Shane Popplewell said of the need to shine on defense. "We knew we could guard them in a zone, but the man was better."

Bullitt Central started in a zone, but when North Bullitt surged ahead by seven points midway through the second quarter, the Cougars switched to a man defense with devastating effects.

"We had a huddle and said that man was the defense," the veteran Bullitt Central head coach said. "I told them who wanted it the most was going to win. I was very proud of them."

North Bullitt scored 21 points through the middle of the second quarter and then had only 16 points over the final 20 minutes of the game.

During the first four minutes of the second quarter, the Eagles had gotten a pair of three-pointers from Lucas Vaughn and then one from Bott that put the green and gold on top 21-14. The Eagles would go the next eight minutes of game time without a point.

Bullitt Central's reversal started when sophomore center Noah Eubanks hit two free throws. Jayden Kearney then stepped in front of a pass near midcourt and went in for a lay-up. In the final minute of the half, Bullitt Central senior Trevor Carnes drained a three-pointer from well behind the arc to tie the game.

Much as had happened in the second meeting of the season between the two teams, Bullitt Central had the ball for a last shot to end the half. In the earlier meeting it was Dawson Kremzar who connected. This time it was Lee who rose up and connected on the three-pointer as the buzzer sounded, giving his team its first lead

since it was 3-2. A lead that the Cougars would never relinquish.

"It was huge," Popplewell said of the run at the end of the half. "We took their best shot and still were in the lead. We knew there was no looking back if we got off to a good start in the third quarter."

Bullitt Central did that. Lee hit a three-pointer on the first shot of the second half and then Carnes hit a short-jumper, forcing North Bullitt head coach Jessie Curry to call a time-out just 51 seconds into the half. Moments later, Kearney hit a three-pointer. The Eagles did not score until Vaughn hit a shot at the 4:44 mark. North Bullitt did get three-pointers from Bott and Cade Cruise late in the quarter, but Bullitt Central still had a 37-29 lead going into the fourth quarter.

When Bott scored early in the fourth quarter the Eagles were within 38-33, but they could get no closer. As the clock ticked below the three-minute mark, Carnes hit the last of his team's six three-pointers and the outcome was no longer in doubt.

"They are a hard matchup for us," Curry said as he sat in an empty classroom where the team had dressed. "They are a tough matchup for a lot of teams. They don't make mistakes. If you make three or four (mistakes) in a row, they make you pay."

"I did not think we were out of it until the last few shots," the coach added. "It is a shame that two teams with 20 wins had to meet each

other this early and one of them has to go home. But that is just the way basketball works."

It just got away from the Eagles late in the first half.

"I felt like we controlled the first half like we did in the second game," Curry pointed out. "Then they (Lee) hit that three. It was the same as three weeks ago."

Bullitt Central had just four players score in this game. Popplewell used only six players with Landon Sims coming off the bench to play for less than a minute.

Lee led all scorers in the game with 19 points while Carnes scored 17. Eubanks finished with 12 points and controlled play around the basket.

Bott was the top scorer for the Eagles with 12 points while Vaughn came off the bench to score 11 points. No other North Bullitt player had more than seven points.

North Bullitt's season came to an end with a 20-9 record.

BOYS' 23RD DISTRICT BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT SEMIFINALS AT BULLITT CENTRAL Tuesday, February 24

BULLITT CENTRAL 53 (7-17-13-16) A.J. Lee 19, Trevor Carnes 17, Jayden Kearney 5, Noah Eubanks 12.

NORTH BULLITT 37 (10-11-8-8) Jeremiah Green 3, Lucas Vaughn 11, Nathan Bott 12, Cade Cruise 3, Jordan McKinney 7, Demarco Harris 1.

EAST JUST SHORT

Down 38-22 at halftime and 46-22 early in the second half, the Bullitt East Chargers were not giving their fans much of a reason to smile.

But instead of dreaming about Spring Break, the Chargers found the range and a way to get back into the game against Moore in the second semifinal on Tuesday.

Connecting on a trio of three-pointers late in the third quarter, two by Clay Reynolds, the Chargers clawed back to within 56-44 heading into the fourth quarter. The Mustangs did push the lead back to 15 points early in the final frame, but Bullitt East had one more charge.

Down 62-47, Bullitt East got back-to-back baskets from Aidan Boyer and Sam Bates before Connor Stinnett hit a three-pointer at the 4:42 mark to pull his team within eight points. Drake Mefford kept the run alive with a basket. Moore did get a basket, but then Stinnett converted a three-point play and two free throws to make it 64-61.

Moore stayed on the offensive, but turned the ball over. Mefford drove to the basket, but the Mustangs' C.J. Sweeney blocked the shot and then scored at the other end. Reynolds scored for Bullitt East and the margin was again three points.

The player of the game for Moore, senior Brandon Williams, scored on the other end and after the Chargers' Brendan Puffer hit a free throw, Sweeney scored again as the clock ticked below one

minute.

Bullitt East called a time-out with 55 seconds remaining, but they could not get off an open three-pointer until Bates knocked down a shot with 22 seconds remaining. Bullitt East had only two team fouls at that point so they had to quickly foul. Finally, the Chargers sent Dexter McAtee to the line. He hit the first shot, but the second was waved off because of a lane violation.

The Chargers rushed the ball to the offensive end, but a quick three-pointer bounced off and Moore rebounded. McAtee, who was eight of ten at the foul line in the game for the Mustangs, hit his last two chances with 11 seconds to play to account for the final score.

"It is tough to lose any time in the post-season," Bullitt East head coach Jason Couch said. "But yes, I was proud that they kept playing hard. They did not want it to be over. I was extremely proud of them."

The difference in the game was Moore's Williams. The senior came into the game averaging just 5.8 points a game. Over the entire season he had made a dozen three-pointers. In this game, he scored 25 points and knocked down five three-pointers.

"Sometimes those things happen in the post-season," Couch lamented.

"We wanted them to take outside shots," the Bullitt East coach said. "They shot it better than normal."

Moore finished the game with nine three-pointers. The Mustangs were also 10 of 12 at the foul line.

Bullitt East had a better-than-average night at the foul line as they were 15 of 20. The Chargers knocked down eight three-pointers with Reynolds and Stinnett each having three while Bates had two.

Stinnett led Bullitt East with 17 points while Bates had 16. The Chargers also had 15 points by Reynolds and 12 by Mefford.

Williams had those 25 points for the Mustangs while Sweeney collected 15 points.

Bullitt East's season ended with an 11-16 record.

BOYS' 23RD DISTRICT BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT SEMIFINALS AT BULLITT CENTRAL Tuesday, February 24

BULLITT EAST 67 (10-12-22-23) Connor Stinnett 17, Sam Bates 16, Brendan Puffer 1, Aidan Boyer 6, Clay Reynolds 15, Drake Mefford 12.

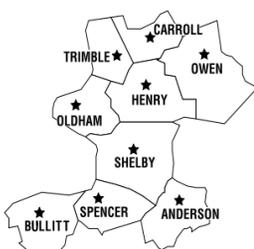
MOORE 73 (10-28-18-17) Admere Ricketts 5, C.J. Sweeney 15, Zachariah Summers 7, Dexter McAtee 11, Brandon Williams 25, Kumbalani Wembo 10.

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