

Cougars hold off late Blue Jay rally

Written by Brian Bassett
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VAN WERT - Leading St. John's 47-27 heading into the fourth quarter at the Cougars' Den Saturday night, the Van Wert boys basketball team was confident they would hold on for a big non-conference win.

When senior Blue Jay guard Curtis Geise drove and scored to cut the Cougar lead to 53-47 with just over a minute to play, however, Van Wert's confidence had diminished.

Fortunately for the Cougars (5-2), they did just enough in the final minute to hold on for a 56-50 win.

"It's a big win. We're coming off a tough loss and we've had to sit on it for eight or nine days. There's always a doubt when you play and Delphos has been playing well," said Cougar coach Dave Froelich.

After shooting 11-of-33 through the first three quarters, St. John's (5-2) turned up the intensity heading into the final frame. They shot 8-of-15 in the fourth and held the Cougars to 2-of-5 from the field in the final quarter.

To make matters worse, the Cougars converted on only 5-of-12 free throw attempts in the fourth, and made 9-of-19 (47%) all evening.

A 47-24 lead which the Cougars had built late in the third quarter, however, proved to be too much for the Jays to overcome.

"Give credit where credit is due; Van Wert played really, really well," explained St. John's coach Aaron Elwer. "(Van Wert) did a lot of things. They played hard, they were more aggressive - they kind of took it to us. We were on our heels, really for three quarters; that score was a lot closer than what it was."

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Froelich was happy with the win but pointed to Van Wert's poor free-throw shooting: "Obviously, we played well in the first half and wanted to keep it going; we didn't attack as well in the second half. We had a chance to really seal it at the line and didn't do that. We're, I think, a better shooting team than that; we're going to try to shore that up."

The Cougars shot 51 percent (21-of-41) from the field and 36 percent (5-of-14) from 3-point land, to St. John's 40 percent (19-of-48) from the field and 25 percent (4-of-16) from deep.

Van Wert also outrebounded the Jays 29-22 and dished out 11 assists to St. John's five.

The Cougars allowed Geise, who averages nearly 20 points per game, to score 15 points but only six came in the first half - in which Van Wert extended its lead to 33-15 by the break.

Froelich was pleased the Cougar defense frustrated Geise most of the evening, holding him to 6-of-16 shooting from the field: "I thought our defensive play was really good overall. I thought we did a good job of containing Curtis and making things tough. Even though he scored some, we made it tough for him for the most part."

Senior forward Ryan Buescher, who also averages double figures, was held to eight points on 3-of-8 shooting by Van Wert.

"They are our one and two, in whatever order," Elwer noted of Geise and Buescher. "They've both been really good through six games. We knew that; we talked about how (Van Wert) was going to prepare for their tendencies."

The 2-headed monster for the Cougars: senior forward A.J. Smith and senior point guard Joey Hurless; continued to lead the team. Smith had 17 points, while Hurless had 12 and dished out six assists.

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Along with those two, Van Wert ran three new starters out on the floor: senior post Logan Ray, senior guard Caleb Markward and sophomore guard Connor Holliday. The move paid off and the Cougars took a 23-9 lead by the 4:48 mark of the second.

"We tell our kids every day is a tryout, a competition," Froelich added. "Caleb has worked really hard and really gives us a better defensive presence on the perimeter. Some kids just earned (the start). It's not a knock on anybody else, just what it was. We'll go back Monday morning and start again - see who is ready to go next week."

Junior forward Matt Bidlack added 10 points for Van Wert and senior post Nik Wolford led the team with seven rebounds.

Junior forward Ryan Koester added 13 points for St. John's. Buescher led the team with eight boards.

Hopefully we'll learn from this," Elwer added. "We've got some good teams down the road who will try to do the same things Van Wert did tonight. We'll watch the film, we'll take care of it and be better because of it."

Both teams return to league play Friday: St. John's at Coldwater in the MAC (6:30 p.m.) and the Cougars hosting Kenton (WBL) at 6 p.m.

VARSITY

ST. JOHN'S (2pt. 3pt. FT Pts.)

Buescher 3-5 0-3 2-4 8, Clark 2-5 1-3 0-0 7, Koester 2-4 2-5 3-3 13, Geise 5-14 1-2 2-3 15, Bockey 2-3 0-1 0-0 4, Grothouse 1-1 0-0 1-1 3, Hays 0-0 0-2 0-0 0.

VAN WERT

Markward 0-0 0-0 0-0 0, Smith 3-6 3-8 2-7 17, Hurless 3-6 2-3 0-3 12, Holliday 2-3 0-2 3-5 7, Ray 2-3 0-0 0-0 4, Bidlack 4-6 0-0 2-2 10, Wolford 2-3 0-0 2-2 6, K. Keber 0-0 0-1 0-0 0.

Score by Quarters:

St. John's 7 8 12 23 - 50

Van Wert 14 19 14 9 - 56

JUNIOR VARSITY

ST. JOHN'S

Wyatt Nagel 0-0-0-0, Aaron Hellman 0-0-0-0, Ryan Hellman 0-0-0-0, Ben Wrasman 2-0-0-4, Ben Dickrede 0-0-0-0, Nick Bockey 0-0-0-0, Eric Gerberick 0-0-0-0, Tyler Ledyard 0-0-2-2, Owen Baldauf 0-0-0-0, Jake Csukker 3-0-0-6, Austin Heiing 0-0-1-1, Alex Odenweller 6-1-0-15. Totals 11-1-3/9-28.

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VAN WERT

Nick Keber 2-0-1-5, Brant Henry 0-0-1-1, Cody Keirns 2-0-0-4, Michael Smelser 0-4-0-12, Nathan Stoller 0-0-0-0, Nick Krugh 1-0-0-2, Jacob Williamson 0-0-0-0, Joey Moreland 2-0-0-4, Ryan Rice 0-0-0-0, Justice Tussing 1-0-0-2, Drew Myers 3-0-2-8, Bryan Mills 0-0-0-0, Davis Munroe 0-0-1-1. Totals 11-4-5/10-39.

Score by Quarters:

St. John's 5 6 9 8 - 28

Van Wert 14 7 12 6 - 39