

Blue Jays KO Rice in regional

By Jim Hughes
staff writer

Oh, those Southfield Blue Jays fans were loving it.

They waved goodbye to Brother Rice, and chanted: "We want Lathrup." Their cause for celebration was Southfield's 75-63 victory over Birmingham Brother Rice in the opening round Tuesday of the Southfield-Lathrup Regional.

Southfield will play the winner of last night's Lathrup-Troy game for the regional championship Friday night. The Blue Jays have defeated Troy twice this season by ample margins, and defeated Lathrup by one point in overtime in the season opener.

For the Blue Jays, it was sweet revenge. Brother Rice had ousted Southfield from the state tournament each of the past two years. This time, it was all Southfield and an excess crowd of 3,000 was on hand to see the Blue Jays run away with it in the fourth quarter.

After missing eight of 10 free throws in the third quarter, the Blue Jays turned the tide as they stizzled from the stripe in the fourth period. Southfield's sharp shooters clicked on 17 of 21 in the last eight minutes to turn an otherwise close game into a rout.

MIKE McCASKILL, Southfield's 6-foot-3 junior forward, was a jack-of-all-trades for coach Greg Sliwka's Blue Jays. He led all scorers with 25 points and dominated both ends of the floor.

"I can't tell you how important Michael is on the boards — both offensively and defensively," Sliwka said afterward in the noisy Southfield locker room. "Nobody on our team can dominate on the boards like he can, when he comes down with two hands. When he tries to bring it down with one hand, he has trouble."

"Defensively, he always has a hand in to deny the pass," Sliwka added. "Every game, he always comes up with three or four steals."

Rice coach Nick Conti praised McCaskill as he analyzed the game during his post-game conference.

"When you're looking for a difference (in the game)," Conti said, "you have to look at McCaskill. He came up with the key buckets, and he came up with the key rebounds. When a kid plays like he did, it tends to make everyone else's performance look ho-hum. He was really outstanding."

Rice, which ended its season with a 18-6 record, jumped out to a 15-10 lead early in the first quarter. After Brother Rice's Paul Jokisch converted a slam dunk to make it 17-10, Sliwka called time out. Whatever transpired in the team huddle took effect, as the Blue Jays scored eight of the last 10 points

to cut the Warriors' lead to 19-18.

IN THE second quarter, the lead changed hands six times before senior guard Mike Priest — playing with a sprained knee and a pulled hip muscle — canned a 15-footer with three seconds to go to give Southfield a 32-31 halftime advantage.

The Blue Jays, who never trailed after Priest's shot, extended their lead to 46-42 at the end of the third quarter which set the stage for their free-throw shooting clinic in the fourth frame.

"In a game like this, it comes down to who can come up with the knock out punch," Conti said. "At times, we had them on the ropes and couldn't put them away, and at times, they had us on the rope and couldn't put us away. At the end, they came up with the final punch that was necessary to win."

The Blue Jays, who scored 17 points from the line in the fourth quarter, outscored the Warriors 29-21 to wrap up the win.

The biggest spread, a 21-12 Southfield advantage, came in the closing five minutes. With the Blue Jays ahead 54-51 at the 4:40 mark, the Warriors went to the line with a chance to cut the Southfield lead to one point. However, both shots went astray, and Southfield capitalized with its scoring burst.

With 3:56 left in the game, McCaskill stole the ball, drove the length of the court, and fired home a right hand slam dunk to give Southfield a 58-51 lead, and the momentum to put Rice away.

ALTHOUGH THE Warriors had an advantage in field goals (25-23), the Blue Jays were 29 of 42 from the line while Rice converted 13 of 22.

Christian plays tonight

Southfield Christian, winner of its own state Class D basketball district last Saturday, begins regional play at 8:15 p.m. tonight at the Demkowski Fieldhouse on the campus of Orchard Lake St. Mary's High School, Commerce Road just west of Orchard Lake Road.

Detroit Servite plays Detroit East Catholic at 6:30 p.m. tonight at St. Mary's. The winners of tonight's games will meet in the regional championship game at 8:15 p.m. on Saturday.

"I was a little worried that we might be intimidated by their height," Sliwka said. "That's what scared me the most. But, I knew if we were dead serious about it, we could stay with them." One of the Blue Jays who was "dead serious" about knocking off Rice, was 6-7 senior center Ralph Walker, who scored eight points and pulled down 13 rebounds.

"We were very confident," Walker

said. "We've seen Brother Rice play several times, and we knew we could stay with them. Our poise was the key factor. We're confident, but we're not overconfident. Brother Rice is a great ballclub, and I give them all the credit in the world. Now, we deserve it (credit)." In addition to McCaskill's game-high 25 points, Priest had 16 and Darwin Cornell added 15. Jerome Walker

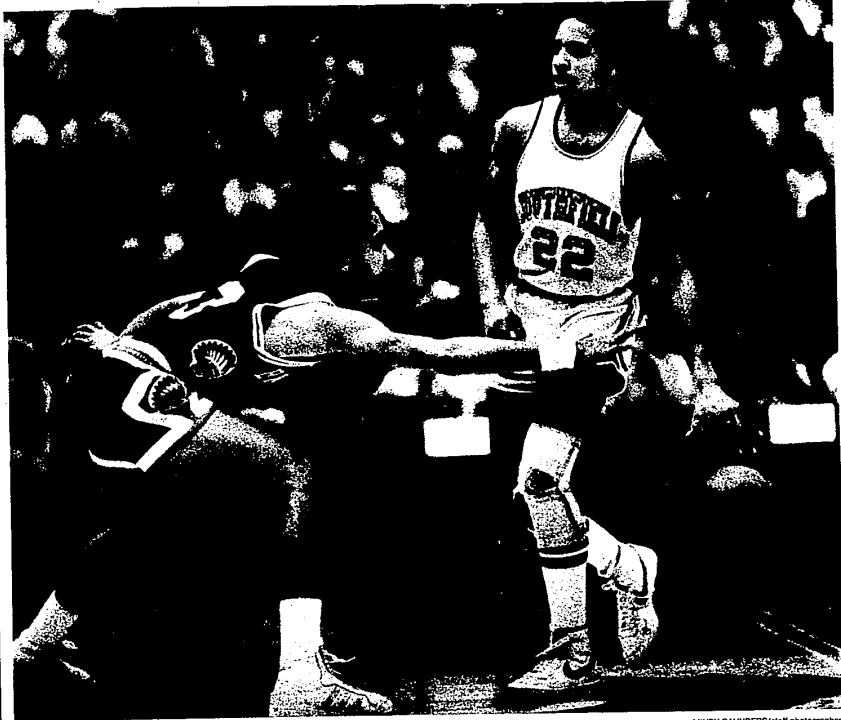
scored nine. John Shasky, the Warriors' senior center, scored 19 points, while Dennis Kosak had 12.

The Blue Jays will go into the regional final with a 23-1 record. Their lone loss was a 54-45 setback to top-rated Highland Park.

The regional final will be broadcast over Southfield High's radio station WSHJ-FM, 88.3 on the dial.

'Brother Rice is a great ballclub, and I give them all the credit in the world. Now we deserve it.'

— Ralph Walker
Southfield center



Southfield's Mike Priest (22) advances the basketball as Brother Rice's Roderick Brown tries for a steal. Southfield beat Rice, 75-63, in state Class A regional game at Southfield-Lathrup.

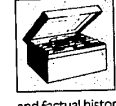
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