

Pioneers coming unglued

Johnson's departure a mystery to Pioneers

PERSONAL REASONS. An odd choice of words, considering the implications of Johnny Johnson's decision. Considering, too, how many are affected by that decision.

If you haven't heard, Johnson, the sophomore starting guard for Oakland University's men's basketball team, quit. Just like that. He said after practice last Wednesday he wouldn't be back. On Thursday, he wasn't.

Johnson missed OU's game at Northwood Institute Saturday. The Pioneers lost by five points. Johnson, the team's second-leading scorer with a 12.5 per-game average, could have made a difference. Particularly since OU is woefully short of proven scorers and especially perimeter shooters.

The consequences of his action are colossal. And whatever reasons, the result of his decision is anything but personal.

GREG KAMPE doesn't understand. The OU coach doesn't believe the rather obscure reasons Johnson's given for quitting. Johnson has said things weren't working out for him, that he was planning to transfer to an NCAA Division I school (OU is Division II).

"Even if you don't like the coach," Kampe said, "would you quit when you're the team's second-leading scorer, when you had just played 37 of 40 minutes and played the best game you've played all season, and when you have a chance to go to the (NCAA II) tournament?"

The NCAA tournament. No one at OU would have believed it three or even two months ago. Kampe had modest goals for his team entering the season: finish better than .500 in the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (GLIAC). If that sounds overly modest, remember that the Pioneers have never been better than 8-8 in the GLIAC before.

Going into last Saturday's game, they had surpassed all expectations. OU was 17-6 overall and 8-3 in the GLIAC, within striking distance of front-runners Ferris State and Wayne State. With games against both coming up this week (Ferris tonight and WSU Saturday), the Pioneers had a legitimate shot at a title.

Those hopes were severely jolted with the loss at Northwood. It was a game they could have won — the Northmen were just 4-8 in the GLIAC and 13-11 overall entering the

contest — and probably would have, had Johnson played.

"IT KIND OF came at a bad time," understated Kampe. "I'm not really sure why he left. He gave me some excuses, but I don't believe them."

"Johnny and I were pretty tight. He was like a son to me. I don't think he wants to play basketball right now."

Kampe went further. "I'll bet he doesn't play another minute of college basketball."

One place he won't play at is OU. Kampe was clear on the possibility of Johnson's returning. "He will never play at Oakland again as long as I am coach," he said.

The real reasons for his departure may never be fully known. Was it burnout? A woman? Or the reason popularly given for an athlete's problems — drugs?

It wasn't academics. Kampe said Johnson wasn't a spectacular student, but he was passing.

In December, Johnson missed four games and three weeks for personal troubles. Kampe still won't elaborate. "He had some problems at home he had to take care of," the OU coach said.

APPARENTLY, Those problems weren't solved. Now he's gone, leaving in the midst of OU's best basketball season ever.

Five games left. These should have been the most enjoyable games of Johnson's college career. Instead, he chucked them.

The reasons for his quitting may be valid. They may be immediate. But to simply label them as "personal" is unfair. It's unfair to the fans, and it's grossly unfair to his teammates.

Johnson's responsibility attached to team sports. That's something all players are taught from the time they first pick up a ball and start dribbling it. By the time a talented athlete reaches college-level competition, he knows individual accomplishment is secondary to the team.

That's one reason why I get upset when players go academically ineligible. They're in school to learn; that's a personal responsibility. But by failing to maintain at least the minimum in scholastics, they are not only wasting their own time but they are ruining their teammates' chances for success.

JOHNSON, THOUGH, is not failing in the classroom, although he'd probably have severe trouble with a course in responsibility.

Just when things were going so well for Oakland University's men's basketball team. In the midst of a school history-making season, the wheels came off the Pioneer wagon last week. First the team's second-leading scorer, sophomore guard Johnny Johnson, quit for personal reasons. Then a trip to Northwood Institute proved disastrous when the Northmen beat OU 76-71.

The loss dropped the Pioneers to 17-7 overall and to 8-4 in the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (GLIAC). Northwood is 14-11 overall and 5-8 in the conference.

OU was anticipating a victory over the Northmen, setting up a pair of pivotal showdown contests with conference front-runners Ferris State (at OU Thursday) and Wayne State (at WSU Saturday). Had the Pioneers won Saturday and been able to succeed against FSU and WSU, they would have been tied for the league lead.

Not now, though.

NORTHWOOD BEAT OU by making seven-of-eight free throws in the final minute. The Pioneers, who trailed 34-32 at the half and were

behind 62-57 with 5:45 to play, put together a 12-6 run to go ahead 68-68 with 1:18 to go. Scott Bittinger's jumper gave OU its last lead.

Bittinger finished with 28 points, among them the 1,000th of his OU career. The junior guard is the eighth Pioneer to reach that plateau. Stacy Davis added 16 points and 12 rebounds, but that was it for double-figure scorers for the Pioneers, who missed Johnson's outside shooting.

"We were ready to go without him," said OU coach Greg Kampe. "Northwood played a great game. We were up 11-2 at the start."

No reason was given for Johnson's departure. He missed three games in December due to personal problems. "I said at the beginning of the season that youth and lack of perimeter shooting depth were our biggest weaknesses," Kampe said. Johnson's loss has added to those woes.

Northwood was paced by James Simmons with 18 points. Mike Urbanus had 17 and Kevin Brown 15. The Northmen hit 54 percent of their floor shots (27-of-50), including 61 percent in the second half (14-of-23). OU was 13-of-29 in the second half (45 percent) and 28-of-59 for the game (44 per-

cent).

OU'S WOMEN used a stalwart defense to roll to a 35-21 halftime lead, and Northwood never got closer than six in the second half as OU won 78-67 Saturday at Northwood.

The Lady Pioneers limited their opponents to nine-of-22 shooting and forced 17 turnovers in the first half. For the game, the Northwomen committed 32 turnovers to 21 for OU.

Leah Fenwick came off the bench to score 18 points, get eight rebounds and five steals. Sarah Knuth added 16 points and seven rebounds. Kim Klein and Celeste Sartor had 11 points apiece. Sartor also had 10 rebounds — and Sonja Pearson got eight points and four steals. Point guard Margaret Boyle added eight assists to her league-leading total.

Northwood's Sharon Berry scored 24 points, with Roni Lloyd scoring 11 and Joan Frynsinger (from Livonia Stevenson) nine before fouling out with 6:30 left.

The win boosted OU to 17-7 overall and 7-5 in the league. Northwood slipped to 13-12 overall and 4-9 in the league.

Lady Ocelots catch OCC

Time was ticking away on Schoolcraft College's women's basketball team. The Lady Ocelots were into the second half of their Eastern Conference showdown with Oakland CC and they trailed by nine points.

SC needed a win to tie the Lady Raiders for the title. The Lady Ocelots got it, rallying for a 65-61 triumph at OCC Saturday behind Sharon Miller's 13 second-half points and four late free throws by Tammy Atkins that clinched it.

Both teams are 10-3 in the conference. SC is 18-8 overall; OCC is 16-5 overall.

Miller finished with 19 points, including five straight SC baskets at one point. Tracy Ladouceur also sparked, scoring 18 points on eight-of-eight floor shooting. Lori Abbas and Lisa Kline added 10 apiece. SC led 27-25 at the intermission before falling behind in the second half.

OCC got 17 points and 12 rebounds from Kelly Geiger, 14 points from Michelle Taubee and 10 points from both Joanne Gregory and Stacie Gills.

OCC'S MENS TEAM got out of the blocks quickly at SC Saturday, racing to a 49-36 halftime lead and never

allowing the Ocelots to get closer than the rest of the way in a 97-85 triumph.

It was an important victory for the Raiders. Combined with losses by Alpena CC and Highland Park CC, it caused a logjam at the top of the Eastern Conference standings. Four teams are within a game of first with one game remaining. HPCC and Delta CC are 12-3, while OCC and Alpena CC are 11-4.

Gary Holt kept the Raiders on track at SC with 29 points. Carson Butler added 22 and Sam Smith contributed 18.

For the Ocelots, the loss was their fourth straight, dropping them to 6-9 in the conference and to 9-18 overall. Still, after suffering lopsided defeats in their two previous games against HPCC and Macomb CC, coach Bob Weitzel thought it was a better performance.

"We haven't been playing real well, and we didn't play exceptionally well against (OCC)," Weitzel said. "We did play better against Oakland, but we're capable of much better."

Derrick Kearney's 24 points and 10 rebounds paced SC. Jeff Vrakratals and Zolzie Stevens added 18 apiece, with Stevens scoring all of his points in the second half.

Both Stevens and Desmond Steele did not start for disciplinary reasons.

JC NOTES: The pairings for the upcoming Michigan Junior College Athletic Association (MJCAA) tournament are far from cemented as teams head into the final weekend of regular season play.

The top two finishers in the Eastern Conference will draw a first-round bye. OCC still has a shot at one

of the byes, together with Delta, Highland Park and Alpena. In the first-round games played Monday, the third-place team will host the sixth-place finisher, and the fourth-place squad will host the fifth-place team.

The winners of the first-round contests will play the conference's top two teams in the second round Wednesday.

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St. Mary's gets even

Ah, vengeance. It wasn't so long ago that Grand Rapids Baptist thumped St. Mary's College in Grand Rapids, thanks to a bundle of free throws. Monday, the Eagles got a measure of revenge by pounding visiting Baptist 86-72.

St. Mary's won the game with a strong first-half effort. The Eagles built a 30-25 lead by halftime, then twice thwarted comeback attempts that brought Baptist to within two but no closer.

Theo Pearson led St. Mary's with 23 points and 13 rebounds. Jon Bow added 20 points and six rebounds, and Jim Bader came off the bench to score 10 points, including two three-pointers down the stretch that kept the Eagles in control.

For the second time in three games, point guard Lance Davis did not start because he missed a practice. Davis still dished out eight assists.

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