

Sports

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Mercy reaches 'A' final, bows to King

By Dan O'Meara
staff writer

Farmington Hills Mercy finished its amazing run through the Class A girls' basketball tournament one comeback shy of a state championship.

The Marlins, who established a reputation for winning rallies, failed to pull it off one more time Saturday afternoon and lost 52-36 to Detroit Martin Luther King in the final at Battle Creek's Kellogg Arena.

The Crusaders (24-1) won their second consecutive title and third overall. Mercy made its sixth appearance in the championship game after eliminating favored Saginaw on Friday night. The Marlins (17-9) have won two state titles.

"I thought we played a good game by our standards, but it was not enough to beat them," Mercy coach Larry Baker said.

"THERE WERE no complaints, no excuse-making. We talked about how we wanted to finish it. We didn't want a lot of weeping. I thought we conducted ourselves with a lot of dignity."

The championship game culminated a hectic week in which the Marlins were uncertain who and when they would play. Mercy got a bye in the quarterfinals after Detroit Murray-Wright was removed from the tournament for using players not on its eligibility roster.

Murray-Wright parents tried to have the tournament suspended through a court action, and the Friday semifinal games were in doubt until a decision was made shortly before the start of the 5 p.m. contest.

"I never thought we had to prove we belonged here," Baker said, adding the Marlins had to beat two good teams (Birmingham Marlian and Saginaw) to get there. "We're this good."

"Our record might not have showed it, but I thought we deserved to be here as much as the other teams," Mercy senior Laure DeMatia said.

King combined a full-court press, good team quickness, strong rebounding and the scoring of 5-foot guard Schwanna Prince to beat the Marlins.

Marlins are 2nd in state

Prince got all 16 of her points in the first half to help the Crusaders take a 30-18 lead. Most of her shots were from the perimeter, and two went for three points.

"WE KNEW that potential was there, but it was a calculated risk," Baker said. "We wanted to take away as much of King's inside game as we could. She stepped up and took the challenge."

"Trying to figure out how to defend that team is difficult, because they do a lot of things well. They can really get into a power game. I felt we really defended that well. The trade-off was that aspect in the first half."

King started a lineup that included 5-11 Tiffany Mitchell, 6-0 Tonnelle Caruthers and 6-2 Gemetrice White. Mitchell had eight points in the first quarter and finished with 13 and nine rebounds.

But it was Prince, averaging 19 points in the tournament and 10 overall, who did the most damage to Mercy's title aspirations.

"Baker is a great coach, and I knew what he would try to do," King coach William Winfield said. "We had to knock down our outside shots and loosen up the inside."

"We wanted to get down the floor and beat them in the transition game, because once they set up in the post they're tough."

DEMATIA LED the Marlins with 14 points and six rebounds. Julie Angell and Mary Bieniewicz scored eight apiece, and Kathleen Berrigan added five points in addition to having six assists and four steals.

While the turnovers were nearly even, Mercy had 25 and the Crusaders 21 — King's press threw

the Marlins out of sync offensively, and its trapping defense caused Mercy to have difficulty passing the ball.

"We were pretty calm in this game; we had nothing to lose," Berrigan said, "but they did a good job of reading the next pass and anticipating."

"I knew (Baker) would have his kids going to certain spots," Winfield said. "I told my kids to keep the pressure up and after a while they would be too tired to get to those spots — and that's basically what happened today."

The Marlins, who trailed Saginaw by six at halftime Friday but won 47-44, were still "within sight" of King at halftime, according to Baker.

White, Tamika Matlock and Caruthers combined to score nine points at the outset of the third quarter, and King's lead was quickly increased to 39-19. Matlock added seven points to the team total and White six. The Crusaders outrebounded Mercy 39-26.

"WITH THE three-point shot nowadays, it doesn't take long for a 12-point lead to vanish," Winfield said. "We knew we had to keep the pressure on and a hand in the face."

"We wanted to work into our offense and not be afraid to make passes," Baker said. "Well, they brought pressure up real strong and we didn't handle the ball real well. I thought we ran our press-breaker well overall, but they got us there."

Mercy trailed 46-28 after the third period, but the Marlins wanted to end the game with a sense of dignity, according to Baker, who spoke lightly to his players between quarters and told them to "have fun out there."

"Now are we going to run and chase them and try to prove we're faster than they are?" Baker said. "Or are we going to stay in the offense and try to execute it as best we can? That was my choice."

"It's not life and death. Every other Class A team would have loved to be where we were playing against King. If we make every shot great. If not we want to go out with style."



JOHN STORMZAND/staff photographer

Valire Jones, a junior guard on the Mercy team, protects the basketball against an aggressive

King defense Saturday in the Class A championship game in Battle Creek.

Marlins settle down, sideline Saginaw



JOHN STORMZAND/staff photographer

Senior Mary Bieniewicz and teammates Katie Heffernan (32), Valire Jones and Marshelle

Brooks (30) celebrate Mercy's victory over Saginaw in the state semifinals Friday.

By Dan O'Meara
staff writer

Coach Larry Baker winced when the Farmington Hills Mercy basketball fans encouraged his players "to fire up" at halftime of the Class A semifinal game Friday night.

Baker had just spent the halftime trying to get the Marlins to calm down and play their usual game against Saginaw. Mercy did that and topped the No. 2-rated Trojans 47-44 at Battle Creek Central Fieldhouse.

The victory sent Mercy to the state final for the sixth time in the 16-year history of the tournament, but top-ranked Detroit Martin Luther King defended its title Saturday with a 52-36 win over the Marlins.

"Firing up was not the problem, settling down was," Baker said. "We did everything but drug them at halftime. We took deep breaths. I talked very slowly."

"It's not the team that wants it most (that eventually wins) but the team that is itself the most."

NEITHER MERCY nor Saginaw played a quarterfinal game Wednesday, and nobody knew if there would be a semifinal game Friday.

Parents of Detroit Murray-Wright players filed suit to stop the tournament from proceeding after the Pilots were removed Tuesday by the Public School League for using ineligible players. A decision was not made until late Friday afternoon, throwing the suit out of court and allowing the games to continue as scheduled.

The Marlins (17-9) received a bye to the semifinals when Murray-Wright was ousted, and Saginaw advanced when Alpena forfeited because it didn't have enough players following a disciplinary move.

"The kids were really wired," Baker said. "Not playing Wednesday had something to do with it, but Saginaw was in the same boat. It was easy for us to forget in the last week these are adolescents. The key tonight was to settle down."

After falling behind 23-11 in the second quarter, Mercy began to do that.

Baker used a timeout at that juncture, and the game changed completely after that. The Marlins began

Games decided on athletic court not court of law

Farmington Hills Mercy traveled to Battle Creek not knowing if it would play Friday in the semifinals of the Class A girls' basketball tournament or not.

The suit brought by Detroit Murray-Wright parents threatened to postpone the tournament, but Judge Kathleen MacDonell's late afternoon ruling allowed the games to take place.

"I wasn't thinking about it today," Mercy coach Larry Baker said after the Marlins upset Saginaw 47-44 in their semifinal. "We haven't talked about it all day."

Thursday was our worst practice and emotionally discouraging day. But today we came to Battle Creek with an opponent to focus on.

"It's been in game, no talk of litigation. It was a great prep basketball game, which we barely won. It was settled on the court, which is the way it's supposed to be."

The Marlins, who were tied in the Central Division of the Catholic League, finished second in the state after losing 52-36 to Detroit in the final Saturday.

"The Murray-Wright thing was a slight distraction at first, but when we got here it wasn't a problem," senior Kathleen Berrigan said. "Getting to the semis was incredible and getting to the final was beyond our dreams."

"I wish my individual play could have been a little better, but for the team it was great. We came farther than we ever thought we would."

to rally as Mary Bieniewicz, Julie Angell, Laure DeMatia and Valire Jones combined to get Mercy within six points at halftime, 25-19.

"WE'RE KNOWN as a comeback team, and we've come back to win in all the big games," DeMatia said. "We just dug in and had guts. (Baker) told us to play Mercy basketball and be ourselves."

Angell, a freshman who didn't play against Saginaw earlier in the season, scored 14 points to lead Mercy and DeMatia tossed in 10. Bieniewicz and Jones also had big games at both ends of the floor, scoring 13 and eight points and grabbing key rebounds.

"(Angell) changes our whole offensive scheme. It's not only her scoring that is a key, but she creates opportunities for Laure, too. Teams were defending the heck out of Laure all year, and they can't afford to do that

now."

Saginaw's all-state guard, 5-7 junior Erin Reed, scored 10 points in the first half but had only three more in the second. She scored 16 when Saginaw defeated the Marlins 47-42 in September.

The Trojans (22-4) also got 10 from 6-3 center Janeta Scals and nine from Tanesha Johnson. Sophomore Tineasha McDuffie came off the bench to score eight in the second half and keep Saginaw in the game.

"We had some Erin Reed Rules working out of a zone defense," Baker said. "We were ready when they slid her down the baseline and that was key. We defended Erin real well the first time and had some clues this time."

"VAL'S PLAY at the top of our zone was critical. She stepped up and played a terrific game."

Baker said he thought Reed felt pressure to take control and did too much in the second half, the same thing he told Mercy point guard Kathleen Berrigan not to do in the first half. Berrigan didn't score, but contributed to the comeback by running the offense well.

DeMatia tied the score at 27 in the third quarter, and the Marlins led 31-27 at the end as Berrigan dumped the ball over the Saginaw defense for a layup with .06 remaining.

Mercy extended its lead to 45-35 in the fourth quarter. Bieniewicz hitting a shot from the wing with 4 1/2 minutes to play.

But the Marlins lost Angell to a fifth foul at 2:27 and DeMatia at 1:41 while Saginaw was in the process of rallying. Reed's triple and Scals' free throw cut the margin to three, 47-44, after DeMatia left.

Mercy was still three fouls from being in the bonus, but it backfired on the Trojans, who had no chance to get the ball other than a steal, which they were unable to get.

The Marlins missed two one-and-one chances, the last with .05 remaining. Saginaw's Jessica Perkins got the rebound but stumbled and lost the ball. Jones scooped it up and secured the win.