



Conference rivals battle in girls basketball title game

Tonka prevails over Hopkins

By **JOHN SHERMAN**
john.sherman@apgecm.com

Nine thousand fans in the stands and perhaps as many as a half a million more watching on TV were treated to Lake Conference girls basketball at its best March 16 at Williams Arena.

Minnetonka, the Lake runner-up, scored a 64-56 victory over Lake champion Hopkins in an intense battle for the state Class AAAA crown.

The Skippers held a 14-point lead in the second half, but Hopkins was able to cut the lead to three at 59-56 before Minnetonka made its final push to victory.

Secret weapon

There was certainly some adversity for the new state champs, who lost center Sidney Reed and star guard Aaliyah Crump on fouls late in the contest. But the Skippers had “a secret weapon” on hand to



(SUN PHOTO BY JOHN SHERMAN)

Point guard Lanelle Wright of Minnetonka turns on the jets Saturday night at Williams Arena as she tries to break away from Hopkins defenders Liv McGill and Tatum Woodson (5) during a chaotic moment in the state championship game. Minnetonka is the winner 64-56.

close out the win.

With Minnetonka holding its 59-56 lead, senior forward CeCe Nesseth

grabbed a loose ball in the lane and banked the basketball off the glass for two points. She was fouled on

the shot and swished the free throw to put the Skippers up by six.

Shortly thereafter, Anna

McKinney made a steal for Minnetonka and passed to Nesseth, who was again fouled. She stepped to the foul line and drained two more foul shots, and that was the ballgame.

“CeCe sealed the deal,” Minnetonka head coach Brian Cosgriff said after the game. “It was a great way for a senior to go out.”

Nesseth described her key three-point play: “I kind of knew the shot clock was running out. I shot the ball with my left hand, and the Hopkins player hit my right arm.”

After Nesseth expanded Minnetonka’s lead, the Skippers still had to deal with Hopkins’ come-back ability and McDonald’s All-American senior guard Liv McGill.

“The last two minutes of the game felt like eternity,” Nesseth said.

“At that point, I thought to myself, all we need is a stop,” Minnetonka senior captain Tori McKinney said. McKinney blocked a shot in the lane and the Skippers regained possession.

Watching from the

bench, Crump realized that even though she couldn’t be on the court, she could impact the game by cheering for her team. “I have so much trust in our team,” she said. “I love all of our seniors.”

Royals’ comeback

Hopkins head coach Tara Starks never gave up hope of winning the game. Cutting the Skippers’ lead from 14 points to three was something to be proud of, but still, it didn’t yield the win.

“We needed to fight just a little harder,” she said. “We missed a box-out and they beat us to a couple of balls. Our girls have battled all season. They will never quit and they bought into everything we asked them to do.”

Starks saw Hopkins’ chances improve when Crump picked up her fifth foul on a charging call with 1:47 remaining in the second half.

“We didn’t talk about trying to foul her out,” coach Starks said. “I just wanted

See **Girls**, Page 16

Red Knights repeat

By **JASON OLSON**
jason.olson@apgecm.com

Talking Saturday night after winning back-to-back state titles, Benilde-St. Margaret’s coach Tim Ellefson said his team craved more.

That more is the challenge, competition, goals and anything else that would make them better in a season filled with a lot of success in a 27-5 record, culminating on the Williams Arena court with an 81-58 win over DeLaSalle.

“It’s two in a row for us,” Ellefson said. “It’s tough, everyone is going after us all season, rightfully so and we welcome that challenge because we know it is tough to win. We saw our boys lose the most historic game I’ve ever seen and we were ready.”

Benilde-St. Margaret’s standout senior Olivia Olson closed out her prep career with a 30-point, 15-rebound double-double and was four assists shy of a triple-double. She was 11-of-13 from the free throw line and shot 50 percent from the field (9-18) in nearly 32 minutes. Guard Pressley Watkins added 18 points, Zahara Bishop and Sidney Friedly each had 11 points as the Red Knights had 23 assists on 30 made field goals which showed their unselfish play to find the open teammate for a better look.

DeLaSalle countered with 15 points from guard Aneisha Scott, 14 points from Madalyn Blaylark, and 10 points from post Jordyn Johnson.

See **BSM**, Page 18



(SUN PHOTO BY JASON OLSON)

BSM junior Zahara Bishop, left, had 18 points against Minneapolis Roosevelt in the state quarterfinal on Wednesday.

2024 SINGLE

2024 SINGLE

GAME TICKETS

ON SALE NOW!

LETTERS • CAMPAIGNS • OPINIONS

2024

The Message You Share Matters to Your Community

Respect

[ri'sp]

show deferen

hold in este

with

BSM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

Playing in foul trouble, Scott was limited to just under 20 minutes on the floor. She was efficient when on the floor making 6-of-9 shots and made 2-of-3 free throws. She added five assists and had one steal but also turned the ball over three times.

“Aneisha’s a great player, a handful to guard because she can weave her way amongst the bigs and find a way to get her shot off,” Ellefson said. “We didn’t game-plan for her to get into foul trouble but I think it was tough luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time but that’s part of the game and had an impact on the game.”

Bishop picked up two fouls in the opening half which forced her to focus more on defense and getting the ball to her teammates to take the pressure off her.

BSM closed out a competitive opening half on a 10-2 mini-run just before halftime to carry a 42-37 lead into the break.

Trailing 34-32 with 4:01 to go in the half, Olson grabbed a defensive rebound before scoring a layup in transition. She was fouled and made the extra basket to take a 35-34 edge. Bishop was next up to collect the ball on the defensive end and drive the length of the court before kicking a pass out to Watkins for an open look at a 3-pointer, making the basket. Less than 20 seconds later Friedly got into the action with a steal and layup and soon after Kapsner forced a turnover in the paint, making the layup to take a 42-34 lead with 2:11 before halftime. Josie Nnaji forced a turnover in the lane before adding a layup after subbing Olson out at the 1:56 mark. Nnaji’s points came with 33 seconds to go and a 44-37 lead.

Over the second half BSM went on a 37-19 run to take control of the game after DeLaSalle cut the lead to 48-46 with 15:08 to go on a free throw by Scott but that would be as close as the Islanders would get.

BSM went on a 15-0 run spanning 6:27 to build a 63-46 lead with 8:41 to go.

“We kept stressing to what we do,” Ellefson said of the halftime message. “Do it well and when we execute other teams tend to wear down either physically or mentally. We just kept doing what we do



(SUN PHOTO BY JASON OLSON)

Four Benilde-St. Margaret's were named to the Class 3A All-Tournament team including back row, fourth from right Olivia Olson, Pressley Watkins, Zahara Bishop and Kate Kapsner.

with loose balls, and deflections and turned them into layups and some timely shots. Momentum is a great thing and we got some of that in the second half.”

Bishop said they felt the Islanders take a step back without getting a shot to fall during the run which fueled the Red Knights to keep the pressure on.

“We kept getting steals and fastbreaks and it gave us more energy,” she said. “They’re a great team but we kept pushing.”

BSM had five steals and two blocks in the second half alone while limiting the Islanders to 32 percent shooting from the floor and just three free throws in the second half. They finished the game making 12-of-13 free throws but turned the ball over 16 times compared to just nine turnovers by BSM.

After a 3-5 start to the season, BSM won 24 consecutive games all coming in 2024.

“We prepared for a long time to play high-level basketball throughout our season and the girls craved more,” Ellefson said. “They were excited to play every game down the stretch and it was fun and satisfying as a coach to have a team that is as focused and confident in what we were doing. It was a pleasure to be on the sideline.”

Wild season

From breaking a hand in the season opener to having successful surgery to repair the break with plates and bolts, the 2023-24 season was a series of highs and lows and in the end, way more highs for Olson.

“It’s crazy,” the McDonald’s All-American said. “It was so hard for me at the start to go down in the first minute of the first game of my senior year. I thought it was over for my senior year but it helped the team rally around each other, we became so close on and off the court. People stepped up at different times, [Bishop] stepped up Kate [Kapsner] stepped up, and everyone played a part in the whole season. When I came back, it pieced together but it is crazy to think it is over now. I’m just glad I was able to get back and help our team win.”

Ellefson was asked what Olson means to this team. “Not just this team but this school. Everything she touches is with grace and I often talk about our program being about dedication, sacrifice, perseverance, and relentlessness and she shows that every day. Always trying to get better, working hardest, and setting a great example for everyone. She’s the jokester but knows when it is time to compete. It’s just a great mix that is irreplaceable but we are going to try our best, for sure. I’ve known her for a long time and I knew what I was

getting when I came here. Someone to build the program around as her as the model of working on her game, being a good teammate and that tells her way more about the points she scores. Her legacy will carry on past her, always looking to her as the beginning of it.”

Olson said it was surreal to absorb everything that comes along with the success they had on the court. “Our goal first practice was to do it again and to rally around everyone, working so hard all year, such a cool way to rally together and I’m going to cheer them when I’m in college.”

Road to the final

To return to the title game, BSM defeated unseeded Minneapolis Roosevelt 75-40 at neighboring Maturi Pavillion on March 13 which set up a 2023 title game rematch against Stewartville on Thursday at Williams Arena. The Red Knights once again pressed ahead for a 73-42 win.

In just over 30 minutes on the floor, Olson had 32 points on 12-of-23 shooting. She made all five of her free throws.

The Red Knight built a 34-24 halftime lead and didn’t let up over the second half outscoring Stewartville 31-19 in the second half.

When BSM wanted to push the pace, the Cougars couldn’t keep up (15-0 fast break) and were

outscored 12-6 in second-chance points.

The Red Knights used their size advantage to outscore Stewartville 34-24 in the paint doubled them up 12-6 in second-chance points and when pushing the pace, held a 15-0 margin on the fast break.

Stewartville had the edge in turnovers by a 19-7 margin.

Bishop added 18 points and Kapsner added six points as 10 different BSM teammates scored. Olson grabbed seven rebounds and Nnaji added six rebounds to pace the team. Olson and Kapsner each blocked a shot. Olson was one of three teammates with two steals as the team had 11 steals.

Friedly went coast-to-coast creating a turnover under the BSM basket before making a jump shot to build a game-high 33-point lead, 73-40 with 41 seconds to go.

Stewartville’s Audrey Schnindelar led the team with 16 points on 6-of-11 shooting from the field and Savannah Hedin added 9 points on 3-of-13 shooting.

Quarterfinal

Similar to the state opener, played next door at the Maturi Pavillion on March 13, BSM downed unseeded Minneapolis Roosevelt 75-40.

Olson had 35 points and Bishop added 18 points as the Red Knights shot 43.8 percent from the field (14-32) and 11-15 from the free-throw line. Kapsner had seven points, four rebounds and three assists. Olson added eight rebounds, four assists and four steals to help guide the team.

Friedly pulled down nine rebounds to go with five assists and five points in a team-high 30:29 on the court. The Red Knights had 13 steals and five blocks with Watkins and Mari Wismer each blocking two shots.

BSM dominated inside outscoring Roosevelt 40-18 in the paint, 23-6 in fast breaks and 11-6 in second-chance points.

BSM led 33-27 at the break but turned up the defensive intensity over the second half by a 42-13 margin with a tough 2-3 zone that the Teddies couldn’t solve.

Roosevelt was led by Olivia Wren with 17 points who fouled out with 7:17 to go in the contest and Jayla Bennett with 10 points.

Follow Jason Olson on Twitter @JasonOlson or @SunSportsJason.

Red Knights

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

of it again. I thought it was a great environment and a great game to be a part of.

Budding rivalry

The two teams have seen each other a lot since becoming Metro West Conference foes for a third season (2021-22). Orono won a less-dramatic 2023 section final, 66-62, and played a neutral-site Chanhassen High

School. BSM swept both conference games as the two teams played for a third time since Jan. 29. The Red Knights won 83-54 in Orono on Jan. 29 and at Haben Center 85-68 on Feb. 23 to set the scene for Thursday. Groves had 25 points in the first meeting and 35 points in the second meeting.

The teams split the 2022-23 conference games before Orono went on to win the third-place trophy at state.

Spartans coach Woehler praised the atmosphere at the St. Louis Park campus.

“Packed house, two really good teams, two rival teams, and they took it to us the first two times but

the guys showed some pride and decided we were going to be the aggressor tonight,” he said. “[The game] went back and forth – we are up 12 they make a great comeback. Benilde has a bunch of tough kids who are well coached.”

Johnson echoed similar thoughts: “We’ve had some great battles with Barry and I think it is turning into a rivalry for us, we thrive on it. It’s fun to compete and that’s what Barry does as a coach, compete. It’s fun to have a guy like that to keep it going.”

Follow Jason Olson on Twitter @JasonOlson or @SunSportsJason.