
SPORTS > LOCAL:

Just what the doctor ordered

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ROCK FALLS - Jamie Russell stole the ball at midcourt Wednesday night and knew just what to do. The Rock Falls junior had one Dixon player to beat, but nobody was prepared for the way she was about to do it.

Russell took a jab step to her right, took a jump stop completely around Kellsie Howell and laid the ball off the glass and into the basket.

The play counted for two of Russell's career-high 34 points in the Rockets' 53-45 win, the guard's second game back from a knee injury that kept her out for 15 games. It also drew applause even from the Dixon parents sitting behind press row.

"She's just a player," said Rock Falls coach Craig Mammosser, whose team snapped a six-game losing streak. "We're so glad to have her back, because she makes so much of a difference for this team."

Emily Hubbell and the Duchesses gave their fans plenty to cheer about on their own. Hubbell ended her prep career with 16 points, 14 rebounds and four blocks, and Dixon withstood Russell's onslaught to stay within striking distance until the end.

"We worked our butts off," Hubbell said, "but it's hard to beat a team with Jamie Russell. It's hard to leave the gym right now, but we did the best we could, and I'm really proud of that."

Gina Venier's 3-pointer and Teresa Cecchetti's baseline drive pulled the Duchesses to within 49-45 with two minutes left. Russell and Lindsey Coward then made four of five free throws, and Dixon's final three possessions ended in a turnover and two missed 3s by Venier.

"Word around town was, 'Why even go?' " Venier said. "When the game was canceled (Tuesday) people said we should just stay home, why even come out here? But when I look at the scoreboard, it was only eight points difference. That makes us proud. That's why we came out here."

Russell scored 20 of her points in the game's first 12 minutes. Her leg showed no signs of wear, but she admitted she was tired by the end of the game.

"I feel pretty good but I'm definitely out of shape," said Russell, who shot 11-for-17, made all four of her 3-pointers and had eight of her team's 18 steals. "It's great to be back, though. I didn't like sitting out at all."

Russell was guarded for most of the final three quarters by Howell, who also was playing her second game since returning from a cracked tibia that kept her out two months.

"It was pretty exciting to guard her," Howell said. "I was just trying to get back on the court for a few minutes, so that was a great challenge."

Molly Anderson, Jordan Chappell and Lindsey Coward deferred to Russell for most of the game, but all three made big plays down the stretch for the Rockets.

"Toward the end it was getting close," Russell said. "I think they realized it would be the better team that would win - not just one player - and they all stepped up their game."

Cecchetti scored 14 and Venier added 10 for Dixon. Both juniors will return for a program that hopes to build on its late-season momentum. The Duchesses won seven of their final 11 games, with the only losses to NCIC powers Rock Falls, Sterling, Ottawa and Geneseo.

"Things are looking up at Dixon," Hubbell said. "This is the best team I've ever been on here, and next year they're going to be even better."

Rock Falls will play for the regional title tonight against Huntley (24-5), which routed Rockford East 57-15 on Monday. The Red Raiders will have an extra day of rest because of Tuesday's snow, but the Rockets believe their fate is in their own hands.

"If we don't play well, we're going to get beat; if we play well, we're going to win," Mammosser said. "We didn't get much rest tonight, but I think these girls can handle it."

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