

SPORTS > LOCAL:**Warriors punch
Golden ticket***Carbaugh leads Sterling to
first Elite Eight
appearance in 24 years***BY WILL LARKIN
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DEKALB - Devon Carbaugh's place in Sterling basketball history was secure well before Monday night. This weekend, the senior will share the state's biggest stage with her teammates.

Carbaugh's 28 points and 16 rebounds led the Golden Warriors to a 61-47 win against Maine West at the NIU Convocation Center and Sterling's first trip to the state tournament since 1983. The Golden Warriors' Elite Eight berth also comes 30 years after the program won Illinois' first girls basketball championship.

"I don't think we could have played much better," said Carbaugh, who dominated after her first two shots were blocked by Maine West's Mary Kusner. "Everything was clicking, and now we feel like we're on top of the world."

Both teams' game plans centered around Sterling's 6-foot star. The Golden Warriors wanted to pound the ball underneath and get Maine West forwards Kusner and Brittany Begrowicz in foul trouble. Maine West planned to do the same thing and force Carbaugh to the bench.

Sterling's plan worked to perfection. Kusner and Begrowicz combined to commit seven fouls before halftime, forcing them to the bench and allowing Carbaugh free reign. The senior went 8-for-15 from the field and 12-for-13 at the free-throw line, where the Golden Warriors outscored Maine West 23-8.

"That's one thing we knew couldn't happen," Maine West coach Derril Kipp said. "Those kids provide all our inside scoring and rebounding, and having them on the bench was the difference in the game."

Carbaugh's play showed the Golden Warriors meant business, but her teammates broke Maine West's spirit. Ashley Hammelman scored 10 of her career-high 14 points in the second half. Ashley Day added eight points and made all three shots she took from the field. Jackie Howze scored six and added a game-high four assists and a team-high four steals.

"Every person knew they had to play their game, and they had to be aggressive," Hammelman said. "If we wanted to win, we all had to play a part."

Howze held the ball for the game's final 10 seconds. After the buzzer sounded she looked for a referee to hand the ball to as her teammates celebrated. Seconds later, Howze's hands held the supersectional

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Devon Carbaugh (center) and the Sterling Golden Warriors celebrate Monday after defeating Maine West 61-47 to advance to the state tournament for the first time in 24 years. (Phil Marruffo/SVN photo)

championship plaque.

"That just felt awesome," Howze said. "I still can't believe it."

"Everybody's in shock," Day added. "This is kind of an unknown feeling for us, so it will probably take a couple of days to really realize what we did."

For all Maine West's problems, the Warriors weren't out of the game until the fourth quarter. A perfectly executed high-low pass from Kusner to Begrowicz shrank Sterling's lead to 49-43 with five minutes left, but Day scored four in a row to put the Golden Warriors up by 10 a minute later. Sterling didn't attempt a field goal after that, going 8-for-12 at the foul line during their final seven possessions.

"I knew we had it for sure for sure with about 55 seconds to go," Carbaugh said. "All the emotions start running, and you start to realize what you just did."

Maine West scored the game's first four points, but the Warriors' last lead was erased when Carbaugh tied it 6-6 with two minutes to go in the first quarter. Carbaugh converted the first of her three three-point plays on the next possession to give Sterling a 9-6 lead it never relinquished.

Sterling's first taste of state basketball in 24 years will come against Fenwick, one of the nation's most talented teams. Until then, the Golden Warriors can bask in their improbable achievement.

"We were underestimated by everybody this year," Howze said. "I think we underestimated ourselves. We just keep proving ourselves every game, and we feel like we can play with anyone right now."

Coach Bruce Scheidegger, who came to Sterling nine years ago, quickly followed his first sectional championship with his first Elite Eight appearance.

"It's really hard to put what this means into words," Scheidegger said. "I think of all the coaches who have helped get this program where it is, and it's really a great reward for all of them. When you get those plaques, that's hard to discredit. Now we can hang them up, and nobody can ever take them away from us."

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