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Grafton girls resurrect focus

Loss kick-starts drive to state

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Special to the Journal Sentinel

Posted: March 5, 2007

There were no standard layup drills when practice began Jan. 29 for the Grafton girls basketball team.

Two nights earlier, the team squandered an 18-point lead, suffering a 50-48 loss to Homestead. The defeat ate at coach Bob Maronde and the girls all weekend. He did not want the loss to mar what had the chance to be a special season. He wanted to do something symbolic to erase what had happened.

So the start of practice featured a mock funeral for the team, complete with black sunglasses and a eulogy.

"I told them they were a great team and I loved them," he said. "I told them the team had died Friday night. I had a signup sheet and I asked them to sign up for a new team. There were a lot of smiles because they know I'm kind of crazy.

"I did it up real good, and they went along with it."

All the way to Madison.

On Saturday, in a Division 2 sectional final, Grafton overcame an 11-point fourth quarter deficit and posted a thrilling 47-45 victory over New Berlin Eisenhower.

Grafton (21-3) will play Greendale in a WIAA state semifinal at 3:15 p.m. Friday at the Alliant Energy Center. This is the Black Hawks' first trip to the state tournament since 1994.

"Coach is really unique in his way of motivating us," senior forward Halie Ziegler said. "His eulogy made us think about our season. It gave us a pick-me-up and a new outlook."

Some of the fans in attendance Saturday against New Berlin Eisenhower surely gave Grafton up for dead when it trailed, 44-33, with a little less than 4 minutes left to play.

"When I called a timeout, I told them we have a run left in us," Maronde said. "I looked in their eyes and they believed they could do it."

The key to Grafton's comeback was its free-throw shooting. As a team, the girls check in at about 60%, but they made 11 of 12 free throws in the fourth quarter.

"We've been practicing our free throws every day after practice," said Rachael Hencke, a 6-foot-1 junior center. "It finally paid off."

Hencke is averaging 14.8 points and 10.7 rebounds per game. Lindsay Wilde, a 5-foot-4 junior point guard, has played with Hencke for so long that she remembers when Hencke had to look up to her.

"She didn't grow until close to high school," Wilde said. "All of a sudden, she was doing these amazing post moves. You don't find many 6-foot-1 posts who can dribble it up."

Added Maronde: "For a coach, you only have a player like Rachael once every 15 or 20 years."

This season might just be the start for Hencke and Grafton. There are only two seniors on the roster. Hencke and Wilde have another year left, and sophomore forward Sarah Eichler is the team's second leading scorer (14.4 ppg.).

This is in stark contrast to Grafton's senior-dominated state tournament teams of 1991 and 1994. Ziegler and Kara Hanson are the team's only seniors.

"The other groups were mature coming in, but we're (mostly) sophomores and juniors," Maronde said. "We've improved every week and we're still learning and getting better."

Yes, there is still plenty of life left in the Grafton girls.

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From the March 6, 2007 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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