

Watson shot with 15 seconds to play lifts Carrollton past West Central for regional title

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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GREENFIELD - There has just been something about fourth quarters and everything has come together for the Carrollton Hawks throughout the Class 1A IHSA Greenfield Sub-Sectional.

Carrollton and the West Central Cougars have played in three regionals in the past ten years and they were all tight encounters with the Cougars always prevailing in the end. Tonight was the same type of game, but a different outcome.

“It’s been a tough thing for all these years to think about losing all three of those,” **Carrollton Hawks head coach Jeff Krumwiede** said. “I’m glad we were able to get this one tonight.

With 15 seconds to play, Jeremy Watson beat his defender one-on-one and muscled off a short-range shot as the Cougar defense collapsed on him in the paint for the game-winning shot as the No. 8-seeded Hawks defeated the No. 7 seeded Cougars 46-45 in a thrilling and emotional contest.

“Senior year, winning on a last second-shot in the championship game there’s no better feeling than that,” Watson said. Jerrett wanted me to go left and I was like all right I’m taking it and I got to the rim and I made it. It’s something I’ve always wished to do.”

The Hawks have been used to late game heroics this week. Smith hit the game-winning basket against Calhoun in the quarterfinals and two nights later the Hawks outscored the North Greene Spartans in the final five minutes 19-2 to overcome an eight point deficit.

“It’s March Madness and all fourth quarters are going to be like this with two similar teams who both want to win and it comes down to who gets the most breaks in the fourth quarter and we did. We got to keep eating whatever we’ve been eating, how long we’ve been sleeping and whatever we’ve been wearing,” Smith said with a laugh.”

Smith and Watson combined for all but three of the Hawks 46 points. Jacob Stendebeck is the only other player to score and that was a three-pointer in the third quarter. Smith led Carrollton with 22 points and Watson finished with 21. Watson has been struggling in the last handful of games, but he snapped out of his poorer than usual form, especially in the second half where he scored 16 points.

“I was really in a funk early on in the first couple games of regionals,” Watson said. “Finally coming out in this game and shooting well helped a lot.”

The score was close for the entire game and for the most part, Carrollton trailed, which has been another recurring element in the playoffs so far.

“This regional has been insane,” Watson said. “We’ve always been behind, we’ve always had to battle back and everytime Coach K has had faith in us coming back and winning. It’s just crazy.”

West Central, despite having a 13-17 record and lost to Carrollton 44-34 two weeks ago, dominated No. 3- seeded Routt Catholic 57-44 on Wednesday night and jumped out to a 4-0 lead tonight. However, Jerrett Smith scored six straight points until he was whistled for his second foul early in the game and sat on the bench, but only until the end of the first quarter, which West Central led 12-11. The Cougars were assertive in attacking the basket and getting the Hawks in foul trouble. In fact Carrollton tallied seven fouls before the first quarter ended.

West Central’s main weapon was **Jacob Hurrellbrink** who also scored 22 points, but 18 of them were from the free-throw line and finished 18-for-21 from the stripe. Derrick Montgomery was second in scoring for the Cougars with seven points and Landon Hurt was right behind him as he tallied two three-pointers for the game.

“I’m glad we were able to overcome Mr. Hurrellbrink because he’s amazing.” Krumwiede said.

Smith pretty much put his team on his back in the first half, even with two fouls in the second quarter and kept Carrollton close with the Cougars as he was nearly perfect shooting from the field.

“He’s been carrying us,” Krumwiede said. “I couldn’t sit him on the bench. I tried to find a place to hide him defensively, but I couldn’t let him sit there and watch the lead slip away.”

The Cougars led 21-19 at halftime, but they made halftime adjustments and shutdown Smith in third quarter. That’s when Watson stepped up to the plate and carried the Hawks from there on out. However, West Central stretched their lead to 34-28 at the end of the third quarter, which was the biggest of the game.

Then the fourth quarter came along and Carrollton turned up their offense and got some breaks.

West Central opened the final period by turning the ball over three straight times and Carrollton cashed in on every one of them tying the game at 34. From there on out the teams traded baskets. Hurrellbrink scored all of the Cougars points on free throws in the final frame because Carrollton had no answer to legally stop him from scoring. When Carrollton had the ball Smith and Watson traded off points.

With less than a minute to play after Smith made two free throws to tie the game at 44, Carrollton was called for yet another foul on Hurrellbrink. He made the first free throw attempt but after sinking 18 straight shots the last and most crucial one didn't fall in. That kept the score at 45-44 and gave the Hawks the opportunity they were praying for to take the lead for good.

After Watson's go-ahead bucket, the Cougars had less than ten seconds to get a shot off, but they never got within the three-point arc as Watson and Smith closely guarded Hurrellbrink and Gabe Cox while the rest of the Hawks stayed on their men. Cox got a desperation heave off from just inside the volleyball line that bounced off the front of the rim. Carrollton faithful went bedlam after that and the student section rushed the court.

"I was watching the defense and trying to figure out what was going to happen next," Krumwiede said. "I look back up at the clock and there was one-point-something. I thought we were in great shape, we did a great job on defense on that last possession and overall. We held them to 45 points and for us that's a good defensive night."

The Hawks have been battle-tested even before the playoffs started. They lost to the WIVC champions Brown County by three points and then defeated another tough opponent, Triopia, at home in a close game last week.

"Our best week of basketball came at the time when it had to be," Krumwiede said. "We've been through the grinder getting ready for this and it was either going to wear us down or make us stronger. I think it's made us stronger."

This is the Hawks' third consecutive regional championship, but this has definitely been the most hard fought out of them all.

"It's awesome being able to leave that legacy at Carrollton. More than anywhere else I wouldn't want to be apart of any other program," Smith said. "I'm glad I get to put my name down in the forever family and have three regionals behind it."

Carrollton goes to 18-12 and will take on the highly rated Okawville Rockets (26-3) with Evansville commit Noah Frederking, in the sectional semifinals. The Rockets have an additional advantage as they are the hosts of the sectional and two years ago they defeated the Hawks at their gym in the sectional finals.

"We've had so many stressful games this year. One of the things that's made a difference in the second half of the year is we've gotten deeper into our bench. We've

had some guys step up and take some of the pressure away. It's been an extremely stressful season with a lot of very close games and luckily we've come out on top for 18



of them.”

