

Eagles hold off Triad rally, capture Stove Top Stuffing Classic 58-51

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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TROY – It was the old adage of saving the best for last Saturday night at Triad High School's Rich Mason Gym, as the final game of the Stove Top Stuffing Classic turned into a thriller.

And in the end, Civic Memorial, behind 22 points from Geoff Withers and 21 from Jaquan Adams, held off a furious fourth quarter rally by the Knights to win the round-robin tournament's championship 58-51. The Eagles had lead by as much as 20 in the third before the Knights made their run in the fourth.

“Hats off to our kids, hats off to Triad; we kind of knew what we were going to get coming in here,” said first-year Eagles head coach Ross Laux. “And when we got up in that third quarter, the big thing we were telling them was 'This game's not over.' Championship game, it's the first game in the (Mississippi Valley) conference as well, so we just gave it as a conference game. We were telling our kids 'We're up by 20, but this game's not over. They are going to make a few runs on you.' So, never did we think we were comfortable with that 20-point lead.”

And Triad head coach Josh Hunt was just as proud of his players' effort as well in rallying back from the big deficit.

“We showed a lot of heart and character there,” Hunt said. “We showed some resiliency. Obviously, we dug ourselves quite a hole; we got down 20-22 late in the third, but to our kids' credit, they kept fighting and kept battling, and this is what it's all about. We're going to learn from this; it's not the end of the season. I'm sure we'll play them a few more times, and that's what this is all about.

“Credit to CM, they played really well, especially there for three quarters,” Hunt continued, “and they earned this championship this evening. It hurts to lose, you know. That means you invested a lot of time and effort into what we're doing. So I told the kids it's OK to be disappointed, but credit where credit's due. But anytime you shoot four-for-24 from the three-point line against a team that zones, and you turn the ball over 20 times, and you shoot five-for-13 from the free throw line, that's not a very good recipe for success, especially against a team that strictly zones.

“Credit to CM; they're a really good team, they return a lot from last year, and they're going to be a force to be reckoned with going forward,” Hunt also said. “But I really like the guys I got in that locker room, and I think more than anything, we learned about them tonight. They're not going to quit, and they're going to fight.”

The Eagles did lead from wire-to-wire, and the first quarter was a very evenly played affair, in which CM scored the first seven points behind a three from Withers and baskets from Adams and Withers. Triad cut it to 7-5 on a three from Kyle Cox and a

basket from Beau Barbour. CM did raise its advantage to as much as five in the quarter, but Triad continued to answer back, cutting the lead to 15-12 as the quarter ended.

Caden Clark hit a three from the side to open the second quarter for the Eagles, and after an exchange of baskets, Nate Winslow hit a putback to cut the CM lead to 20-18. A Barbour free throw later cut the lead to one at 23-22 before Adams answered with a three and another basket to push the lead to 28-22. The half ended with the Eagles leading 29-24, and still anyone's game.

The Eagles opened the second half with a 15-3 run over the first five minutes plus, with a balanced attack that saw Adams, Withers, Clark and Bryce Zupan all take turns scoring. After a Triad time out and the score 44-27, CM continued its onslaught as Adams and Withers continued to help the Eagles extend their lead, going up by as much as 51-31 before a Jaden Deatherage basket from outside made the score 51-33 as the period expired.

The Knights had a run of their own to start the fourth, scoring the period's first seven points and outscoring the Eagles 18-2, using a pressure defense and timely scoring from Deatherage, Ryan Holcomb, Trevor Nott, and Nate Winslow. Barbour fought his way through traffic to score and cut the lead to 53-51 with 1:30 left, but that was as close as the Knights would get, as free throws from Adams, Withers and Kaleb Denney clinched the game for the Eagles 58-51.

That the Knights took three of four in the tournament was definitely a positive way to start the season.

“You know what? It was a very balanced tournament,” Hunt said. “I thought every team was about equal, so to come out 3-1, you know, you would have told me that at the beginning of the week, I probably would have taken it. Granted, we have five seniors, but we have some inexperienced seniors. They hadn't played in a lot of games; we've got a couple that did. So to come out of there against some good teams, to be 3-1. Like I said, this one hurts tonight, and that just means we put a lot of heart into what we're trying to accomplish.”

And that the Knights did do lots of good things bodes well for the rest of the season.

“I sure hope so,” Hunt said. “We've just got to grow from this loss. It's not like football, where a loss really hurts you. As long as you grow from it, and move forward, and learn from our mistakes and continue to build on our strengths, we'll be just fine.”

And as for the Eagles, there's plenty to learn from their tournament experience as well.

“All four games, we had double digit leads at least once,” Laux said, “and ended up winning every game by single digits. We've got some good film, because maybe we had some mental lapses where we got too comfortable. So we've got some really good film right now, where we can watch ourselves and really learn from the mistakes, and some small things get better.”

And you can also expect CM to be a very good team as the season rolls forward.

“We feel pretty good with the kids we have,” Laux said, “knowing what their weaknesses and strengths are. And as a team, I think we've got a good grip on what we're good at, and what we need to work on.

“We've got three starters coming back, and our seventh man,” Laux also said. “For what we got coming back from last year, you'll take that every year.”

In an game from earlier in the evening, Taylorville, who'll host next year's tournament, defeated Granite City 75-62. Emmitt Gordon lead the Warriors with 24 points, while Jerry Watson added 14 and Davontay Mason scored 8. Gordon, Cox, Adams and Barbour were named to the All-Tournament team, along with Jordan Moats of Taylorville.

The Eagles travel to Alton to play Marquette Catholic on Tuesday night, then host Highland on Dec. 5. The Knights travel to Centralia next Saturday evening before hosting Chatham Glenwood, also on Dec. 5.



[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)