

Spartans edge Triopia in Winchester Tournament thriller

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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WINCHESTER - Standing at the free-throw with seconds to go, Brett Whicker was in a spot he'd never been in before in high school.

The North Greene Spartans had roared back from a first-half deficit and fought toe-to-toe with the Triopia Trojans in the quarterfinals of the Winchester Invitational Tournament.

The score was 53-51 in favor of the Spartans with 13.1 seconds left. Moments before, Whicker gave North Greene the lead on an and-one.

"Usually I don't have that responsibility, but it felt great to take over and help get the win," Whicker said. "I was a little nervous to be at the line because I'm not a strong free throw shooter, but they went in."

Whicker made both foul shots, which proved to be the difference as the sixth-seeded Spartans upset the three-seeded Trojans 55-53 to advance to the semifinals. North Greene will play Payson-Seymour Friday night at 8:30 p.m. The Spartans improve to 11-2 and Triopia falls to 10-3.

"It was a tense game, and our guys stepped up. There was several times they could've folded mentally," North Greene head coach Brett Berry said. "A couple big calls and some and-one's they got at the end. It seemed like every time we breathed on them they were going to the line. Our guys kept their poise."

Not surprisingly, Jonah Hopper led North Greene in the scoring department with 23 points and connected on four three-pointers. His twin brother Josh added nine. Whicker tallied 14 points, and Berry was not only pleased with his performance but also what he's done so far this season.

"He's a kid that's absolutely blossomed this year. He kinda played a reserve role last year and stepped into the limelight this year. He's got the ability to score. Now he's relaxed, confident with what he's doing, and we're proud."

The game started out gloomy for North Greene.

Triopia got out to a 9-2 lead and eventually led by 12 which was the biggest lead of the game. They led 17-8 at the end of the first quarter. However, the would Spartans weather the storm by making defensive adjustments.

"They were killing us on the boards, and we had to make an adjustment. We went into the 2-3 and put our big boys in there. Regardless of anything else we gotta get boards first," Berry said.

The new game plan would prove vital as North Greene would allow 14 points through two full quarters. That's quite a feat considering Triopia has two of the best guards in the WIVC, Shawn Bell and Zach Thompson. Bell finished with 17 points and Thompson five.

"Blake Dean and Brett Whicker just locked it down. Those two guys played outstanding on Bell and Thompson," Berry said.

On offense, the Spartans still found it difficult to score and trailed 25-22 at halftime, but then their star, Jonah Hopper got going.

He scored eight points in the third quarter and gave his team the lead 32-30 on a three-pointer. The Spartans would outscore the Trojans 17-6 in the third quarter and led 39-31.

However, the Trojans would waste little time to make things even Steven once again and set the stage for an epic climax.

Bell got fouled as he made a running floater, converted the three-point play, and Triopia came out in a full-court press. That led to a steal by Thompson and a basket from Garrett Snow.

North Greene called timeout, but that didn't stop the bleeding.

On the following possession, Snow stole a pass from Dean got fouled as he laid the ball in and completed the and-one to tie the game at 39. He would finish with 13 points.

"Our guys tried to be too patient at first. They tried to work the ball, but we don't need to do that. Just bust it up the sideline, take a couple dribbles and go," Berry said. Once they finally started attacking and being aggressive, we got good looks and results."

Sure enough, the Spartans earned an and-one themselves courtesy of Jonah Hopper, which gave them the lead back at 41-39.

North Greene led 44-42 when Bell started to put the Trojans on his back.

He took a pass from Snow and without hesitating, he launched a long three-pointer and drained it to put Triopia on top again 45-44. He then got a steal seconds later, which led to a basket from Jared Milby to make it a three-point game, but North Greene didn't panic.

Carter Hoesman would help rescue the Spartans.

He picked up a loose ball five feet from the basket and laid it up and in to close the gap 47-46. After a free throw from Bell made it 48-46, Josh Hopper tied the game back up at 48, and on the next possession, Hoesman gave the Spartans the lead on a long two-pointer in the corner that sent Spartan nation in a frenzy.

“I was nervous. I didn’t know it if was going in, didn’t think it’d go in,” Hoesman said. “I haven’t been in a lot of games like that in my life. It was tough, but it’s amazing we got the win.”

Still, Triopia wouldn’t fold either.

On the following possession, Snow came up clutch again as he drove to the basket, was fouled by Josh Hopper and connected on his shot for yet another and-one. He made the free throws to give Triopia a 51-50 lead which was answered by Whicker’s three-point play on the ensuing possession.

After Whicker made his two free throws with 13 seconds to play, Triopia scored nine seconds later and then called a timeout. They fouled Whicker again but missed the front end of a one-and-one. However, Thompson failed to get his shot off from halfcourt in time, despite hitting the front end of the rim.