

Regional champs: Marquette Catholic girls capture big win over rival Southwestern 34-24

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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ALTON – Marquette Catholic's girls basketball team set a goal for themselves back during the summer months last year.

It was a simple goal: Win whatever regional tournament they were assigned to.

The Explorers accomplished that goal Thursday night – and they did it in their own building.

Marquette got 12 points from Lila Snider – five of them in a third-quarter burst that gave the Explorers enough of a lead that gave them some breathing room – to defeat Piasa Southwestern 34-24 to win their own IHSA Class 2A Girls Basketball Championship regional and send them to next week's Riverton Sectional, where they will face Pleasant Plains, 55-46 winners over Williamsville in Pleasant Plains' own regional Thursday, at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday with a spot in the Round of 16 at stake in the sectional final next Thursday; the sectional winner meets the Farmington Sectional winner in the Feb. 19 Illinois College Super-Sectional in Jacksonville.

Marquette moved to 20-8 on the year with the win, while Southwestern was eliminated at 17-12.

“It's a goal we set in the summer,” said Explorer coach Lee Green, “and we've said 'regional champs' when we ended every practice; we've been saying it since early June. It's unbelievable – it's all the hard work we put in by the coaching staff, by these girls – we've been working since spring last year with the weightlifting, with the conditioning.

“The two year's I've been here, we put in our system – it's all about defense and grinding and that's what won this regional.”

That Marquette had to grind out the wins to move into the sectional was no exaggeration; the Explorers scored 35 points in their semifinal win against Staunton Tuesday night and 34 points against the Piasa Birds in the final. “We scored 35 points Tuesday, 34 tonight, and we're regional champs,” Green said. “That says a lot about your defense.”

Piasa coach Steve Wooley thought the chance was there for the Birds to get the win over Marquette. “Definitely a winnable game for us, I thought.” Wooley said. “It could have gone either way; Marquette played some really good defense; I thought we did too. Both teams struggled to score; obviously, a turnover here or there was a big thing – they had a little run there, got a little stretch on us.

“We had a couple of comebacks there; we got it down, but they held us off – that's what good teams do, so hats off to them and good luck to them in the future.”

Scoring for both teams didn't come easy; the Explorers jumped out to a 9-4 lead on Piasa at quarter time but the Birds battled back and managed to pull to 12-10 at the half. Things were very close in the third quarter, Marquette managing to pull away a bit after Snider's scoring burst that saw her get five points in a row to give the Explorers a bit of breathing room; MCHS managed to get to a 22-25 lead at three-quarter time, but the fans in attendance knew it was going to be a tight final quarter.

“They have so many plays and coach Wooley does an unbelievable job,” Green said of Southwestern. “We prepared in practice yesterday for all of their stuff; he does such a good coach and does a great job. He runs such good sets and he's got good players and they play hard.

“It was tough to guard; our guards did a tremendous job getting some steals in the second half and turning them over, creating offense off our defense and that's what we wanted to do.”

Southwestern managed to pull to 23-22 with 5:19 to go before Payton Connors connected on a pair of free throws to extend the lead to 25-22, two of five of six free throws Connors connected on to put Marquette ahead 28-22 at the top of the stretch run. Peyton Kline and Snider then put the game away with a pair of free throws and a steal-and-score with under a minute left.

Connors added seven points for Marquette - all at the free-throw line – while Lauren Fischer had six points on the night for the Explorers; Bailey Weible led the Birds with 10 points on the night, followed by Korrie Hopkins with five points and Molly Novack with four points.

