

Big second half comeback isn't enough as Spartans fall to West Central in regional championship

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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RAYMOND - Some teams don't know when to quit.

The North Greene Spartans were losing 34-19 to start the fourth quarter and managed to trim the deficit to three. They needed a three-pointer to tie with 2.9 left, but Jonah Hopper's off-balance desperation shot was no good.

The West Central Cougars survived an 18-4 run by the Spartans and claimed the Class 1A Raymond (Lincolnwood) Regional Championship with a 40-37 victory on Friday night.

"West Central's an outstanding team, and we did everything we needed to in the second half. Our guys a ton of heart," North Greene head coach Brett Berry said. "It was as bleak as it could get for us. A lot of teams would've folded they didn't. They kept coming and coming."

The Spartans finish with a 23-6 record.

The Cougars will take on the Okawville Rockets in the North Greene Sectional Semifinals at 7 PM this upcoming Wednesday.

It is their first regional championship since 2011.

"Words cannot express how I feel right now. It's been a long year. We've had ups and downs no doubt about it, but I'm proud of these guys, and I love them to death," West Central head coach Ryan Sighting said. "North Greene one heck of a ball club. We found a way to hold them off and win. I couldn't be more proud of this group of guys."

The Spartans had their worst start to a game offensively all season long, "by far" according to Berry.

"It's not even close. It was as bad as it could get and yet they didn't give up."

They trailed 11-1 after the first quarter, and it was eventually 17-1 with under four minutes to go in the first half. Zion Thomas broke the drought with a short-range shot with under three minutes to go and then Jonah Hopper made a layup.

However, the Cougars had done plenty enough on offense to lead 22-6, but their defense was a massive credit as to why North Greene struggled from the field initially.

"We got frustrated, and things weren't dropping for us. West Central played really good, and we weren't getting clean looks." Berry said.

“We’ve had some good practices and gotten back on track. We started playing defense we did early in the year,” Sichting said. “I give our guys credit for the defense they played tonight.”

The last time these two teams played against each other North Greene outlasted West Central in overtime 70-69. Jonah Hopper scored 27 points, but last night he was held to nine.

“I think Jonah Hopper is one of the best 1A players in our area,” Sichting said. “He’s one heck of a player, and Aaron Brown did one heck of a job guarding him tonight.”

Josh Hopper picked up two fouls in roughly the first 90 seconds of the game and sat for the rest of the first half. Logan Guthrie and Justin Lawson also battled foul trouble.

In the second half, the Spartans came alive, notably Josh Hopper. He led all scorers with 16 points.

“They came in at halftime and were focused and listening. They knew what they had done wrong and knew the things they needed to do to get better and gotta make those adjustments,” Berry said. “I give them all the credit in the world for that.”

West Central was led by sophomore forward Cole Howard’s 14 points and fellow forward Derick Montgomery added eight. Brown drained two three-pointers, and he finished with nine points.

“I told our guys at halftime we’re up pretty big, but no lead is safe with . They’re so dynamic on offense with both of those Hopper twins,” Sichting said. “I knew they were gonna come back and give us a fight to the end.”

North Greene went on an 8-2 run to start the second half to cut the lead to 24-14, but West Central weathered the storm and got the lead back up to 15.

In the fourth quarter, the game reached intense levels.

The Cougars decided to slow everything down and pretty much play keep away, but it worked out for the Spartans as they got turnovers, which led to points, including a dunk by Jonah Hopper. That was all part of a 10-run.

West Central would score two quick baskets to get their lead up to nine at 38-29, but the Spartans wouldn’t go away.

Three straight Spartan baskets got them to within one possession at 38-35.

With 16.4 left Montgomery was at the line for two foul shots and missed them both, which left the door open for North Greene to tie the game up with a three-pointer, but they wouldn't get a clean look. With fouls to give, Sichtung ordered his players to wait five or six seconds to foul.

That the put the Spartans in a tight spot with 2.9 to play. They got the ball to their best shooter, Jonah Hopper, but his shot hit the backboard as the buzzer sounded.

