

Carrollton slips past Metro East Lutheran to earn berth in sectional title game

by John Hough, Sports Writer
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As Yoda from Star Wars said “Size matters not.” The Carrollton Hawks proved that as they outrebounded, outgunned, and outplayed the Metro East Lutheran Knights. The Hawks lead the whole way and defeated them 61-52 on Tuesday night in the Okawville IHSA Class 1A sectional semifinals.

“They wanted to play the big game and we wanted to play the little game,” Carrollton head coach Jeff Krumwiede said. “We wanted to have the guard play be the strength of the game and they wanted to have the power play.”

Cody Leonard led the Hawks with 16 points. Luke Palan and Jacob Smith added nine.

“We had to be quicker than them, try to get them up in the air, try to draw fouls, and get to the line,” Leonard said. “With all of their big guys locked in the zone we had to get them spread out and when we got them into man we could do our usual offense, run around, and be quicker to get to the bucket.”

Cole Brannan finished with a career high 13 points.

“I feel pretty good. Coach told me that they will be focusing on the other guys so I’m going to have to step up,” Brannan said.

“Cole’s played for three years. If you ask me if I’m surprised, no because I know that’s been in him because he’s had games like that in the last couple of years,” Krumwiede said.

Teddy Fifer of Lutheran led all scorers with 20 points and drained four triples. Jason Johnson muscled his way to 16 points.

“We could never get in sync, we could never get going,” Metro East Lutheran coach Anthony Smith said. “I’m proud of the boys, it’s a great year. We won 20 games and a regional title. Shout out to Carrollton; they’re a good ball club. They didn’t want it to be their last game and we could never recoup.”

The first four minutes started out splendidly for the Hawks. Leonard made a layup, Brannan hit a three-pointer, and Gillingham converted on a mid-range jumper. The score was 7-2, but with 3:44 to go in the first quarter Palan picked up his second foul and sat out for the rest of the half. Yet again this season foul trouble hurt the Hawks.

“They started the other 6’6” kid so that they could get a mismatch on Palan and get him in foul trouble and that’s exactly what happened,” Krumwiede said. “We decided to play without Palan and hold the ball and try to run as much clock as we could.”

That is when Brannan asserted himself.

“Luke got in foul trouble early so I had to step up,” Brannan said.

Carrollton finished the first quarter with a 14-10 lead as Luke Gillingham hit a layup at the buzzer.

The Hawks played very well without their playmaker Palan in the second frame. They went on an 11-3 run and led 27-19 with under a minute to go until halftime, but Fifer knocked down a trey with 10 seconds left, making the score 27-22 in favor of the Hawks at the break.

“We thought we could get a layup or two but got three or four and I was really happy with the way we did that with Palan out,” Krumwiede said.

Palan made an instant impact upon his return in the third quarter as he converted on an and-one on the Hawks first possession of the half.

“He was immediately a factor in the game and changed everything,” Krumwiede said.

On offense Lutheran was careless at times as they committed a number of unforced turnovers that led to transition points for Carrollton. The Knights finished the game with 22 turnovers.

“We couldn’t take care of the basketball, which has been our Achilles heel all year,” Smith said. “In games like this you have to make sure you take care of the basketball and have good possessions.”

The Hawks had two nine point leads in the third quarter, but led 43-37 going into the final frame. Then the momentum would swing Carrollton’s way.

“As the pace quickened it was our advantage a little bit,” Krumwiede said.

Carrollton turned up the jets at the beginning of the fourth quarter. It all started with a nifty ally-oop layup by Leonard that propelled the Hawks to a game changing 9-0 run to put them up by 15 at 52-37.

But with 6:00 to go Leonard rolled his ankle as he landed on the floor after he scored on a fast break layup and was limping for the rest of the game. He continued to play until the end and is optimistic about his ankle.

“I did something with the inside of my ankle when I was going up on that fast break. I don’t know how I did it,” Leonard said. It hurts now, but I think I’ll be good by Friday.”

Lutheran cut the lead to as close as 54-48 with under 90 seconds to play, but Leonard and Jerrett Smith converted on crucial uncontested fast break layups as the Knights put on a heavy press to try and force turnovers.

Smith with 47.6 to play made a layup, was fouled, and made the free throw to complete the and-one to put the dagger in the Knights with a 58-48 lead.

Jerrett Smith also had one of his better games of the season by scoring seven points and playing astute defense.

Carrollton (27-4) advances to the IHSA Class 1A Okawville Sectional Finals on Friday as they await either the Morrisonville Mohawks or the host Rockets, who play tonight at 7 p.m.

Metro East Lutheran's season ends at 20-11 in coach Smith's first season at the helm, and they graduate only two seniors.