

Rodgers Leads McGivney Catholic With Strong Scoring Night, But New Athens' Birkner's 23 Guides His Team To Boys Win

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
November 30 2022 5:27 PM



GLEN CARBON - Jackson Rodgers led Father McGivney Catholic with 18 points on Tuesday night, but a 23-point performance from New Athens center Garrett Birkner helped the Yellowjackets to a 53-46 win in the Griffins' home opener.

New Athens went on a run in the second quarter to tie the game 27-27 at halftime, then went ahead early in the second half and never trailed again, building a double-digit lead through much of the second half. The Griffins did rally to within four points late, but the Yellowjackets were able to hang on to take the win.

"We have to learn from tonight's loss," said McGivney assistant coach Mitch Carriger, who ran the team in the stead of head coach Todd Strong. "We got beat on the boards, we gave up a lot of second chance opportunities and we just have to sit down and guard a little bit better and dig in and get those stops in those key situations."

The Griffins did have a good showing in the season-opening Mulberry Grove Thanksgiving tournament, winning three of four but falling to St. Elmo in the final, and Carriger is optimistic that the team will be able to bounce back from the loss.

"Yeah, I feel good," Carriger said. "We played well at Mulberry Grove in our Thanksgiving tournament, then came down tonight and stumbled a little bit. But we've got a good group, an older group, a lot of seniors, a lot of really good ball players on this team. They will rebound and we'll come back a little stronger from this."

Carriger did feel that the key was New Athens' ability to rebound and create second chances that the Yellowjackets converted into points.

"Rebounding," Carriger said. "I just thought they got too many second chance opportunities, we didn't get enough of them and those extra shots was what getting them those late buckets down the stretch."

It's still very early in the season and all the mistakes that were made in the game are very correctable in practice.

"Yeah, definitely got to get back into practice tomorrow and Thursday," Carriger said, "and getting ready for another game and get back after it again."



McGivney started out strong, as both Rodgers and Jacob Huber jumped out to score eight of the game's first nine points to give the Griffins an early 8-1 lead. A three-point play by Gabe Smith stretched the McGivney lead to 11-4, with a pair of Birkner baskets cutting the lead to 11-8 before another Rodgers basket gave the Griffins a 13-8 lead after the first quarter.

In the second quarter, an Evan Schrage basket and a three from Smith extended the McGivney lead to 18-10, which became 20-13 after a basket from Huber. The Yellowjackets got a three from Isaiah Linker to cut the lead to 20-16 and after a pair of free throws from Rodgers to make it 22-16, New Athens went on an 11-5 run to finish the half, behind Birkner, to go into a 27-27 tie at halftime.

Birkner and Owen Tolson scored the first six points of the second half to put the Yellowjackets ahead for the first time in the game 33-27, and after an exchange of baskets and a Griffins' time out, Birkner, Jack Alfedt, and Linker all scored to increase the New Athens lead to 41-29. Ashton Mersinger hit back-to-back baskets before the end of the quarter to make it 41-33 at three-quarter time.

The final quarter started with an exchange of baskets that made it 43-35, with a baseline three from Schrage cutting the New Athens lead to 43-38. Linker and Birkner then took charge for the Yellowjackets, leading New Athens on a 10-8 run to end the game as Birkner hit key free throws and baskets as the Griffins couldn't get closer than six points as the Yellowjackets took the 53-46 win.

Birkner led the way for New Athens with 23 points, while Linker added 12 points, Andrew Wynn hit for seven points, Alfedt and Tolson had four points each and Ethan Range scored three points.

Rodgers' 18 points led the Griffins, while Schrage had nine points, Huber scored seven points, Smith had five points, Mersinger scored four points and Drew Kleinheider had three points.

The Yellowjackets are now 3-1 on the year, while McGivney goes to 3-2 on the season and goes on the road for the next three games, playing at Trenton Wesclin Friday night, then is at Marquette Catholic on Dec. 6 and Centralia Christ Our Rock Lutheran Dec. 9, with all games starting at 7:30 p.m. Carriger is still very optimistic that the Griffins will have a very good season and will be a team to be reckoned with.

"As I said, I like our guys," Carriger said. "We have five seniors that have been through this program and have been playing since they were freshmen. And we have a good mix of some younger guys that can step in and give us some different looks. So, I like what we have, a few things to clean up, but we will get it there."



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