

Roxana Beats Southwestern To Earn Trip To Regional Title Game

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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WOOD RIVER - It's not their home court, but it might as well be.

Roxana's hunt for a regional title continues after beating the Southwestern Piasa Birds by a score of 34-24 in a Class 2A Regional Semifinal Wednesday night inside Memorial Gym at East Alton-Wood River High School.

"Our kids play well here over the years," Roxana head coach Mark Briggs said. "It is like a home game for us, not because of the travel, but because we're in this gym a lot. We love this gym, it's a great shooting background for you."

They'll be back at EAWR Friday night in the Regional Finals against the No. 1-seeded Greenville Comets. That game tips off at 7 p.m.

As for the game against the Piasa Birds, it was a low-scoring, defensive affair that went from possession to possession.

"It usually is," Southwestern head coach Jason Darr said. "It looked a lot like the rest of them. They know what we run, we know what they run, so it's usually going to be a low-scoring game."

It was also a close game throughout. Thanks to a buzzer-beater three from Roxana's Chris Wallace, the game was tied up at 13 heading into the locker rooms.

For Roxana, they just needed to keep up their intensity, and they did.

"We just talked about finding a way to sustain the effort that we were giving in the first half," Briggs said.

Coming back onto the court Ian Brantley scored back-to-back baskets to give the Piasa Birds a 17-13 lead.

Evan Wells went hard to the rim for a score and a foul. He sank the free throw to make it 17-16. Ashton Noble went to the line shooting two and made one to tie the game up at 17 before Walleck drained another three to go up 20-17 heading into the fourth.

"Those are momentum plays," coach Briggs said. "Chris didn't have his best game from behind the arc but he hit the two big shots he needed. He's been our guy this year that makes big plays. I'm very proud of him."

Piasa found themselves in foul trouble in the fourth with the Shells shooting bonus for the rest of the game.

Roxana shot 27 free throws on the night, 22 of them were in the final frame. The Shells went 12-22 from the line down the stretch to put the game away.

"We just kind of got out-muscled a little bit late there," Darr said. "We didn't shoot the ball very well. You've got to put the ball in the basket and we struggled tonight."

The Piasa Birds, earning the No. 2 seed in their respected sub-sectional, had a first-round bye straight to the regional semis. Darr believes it had his team a little off.

"We haven't played since last Thursday, I was a little bit worried about it," he said.

"Sometimes I think you're better off playing the Saturday game because you can kind of keep your legs fresh and your guys in tune, but it's not an excuse. They were the better team."

For the Shells, the game went almost exactly according to plan. Briggs thanked his coaching staff and his bench players.

"My assistants did a great job getting us ready today," he said.

"Lots of hours put in a quick turnaround game after Wood River. Our JV guys, our scout team in practice, were tremendous the last two days. We were able to take away almost everything they were trying to do and that's the difference," Briggs added.

Wallace led all scorers Wednesday night with 10 points while Aidan Briggs had nine. Wells and Noble each scored six and Jackson Garman had three.

For the Piasa Birds Rocky Darr scored eight, Brantley and David Watkins each scored six, Greyson Brewer had three, and Lane Gage had one.

Southwestern finishes its season at 16-16.

After a relatively slow 10-21 regular season for Roxana, the team is exceeding its postseason expectations.

"A team that prior to this one had only won 11 games, to be in the regional championship game? I'll take it," Briggs said.