

Explorers Win Regional Title Over Pana Thanks To Big Outing From Rochester

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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LITCHFIELD – “We had three goals this year: 20 wins, win conference, and win a regional,” Marquette Catholic senior Parker Macias said.

The Explorers already checked the first two boxes and finished off the to-do list Friday night.

Marquette defeated the Pana Panthers by a score of 43-32 in the Class 2A Regional Finals Friday night inside a loud Litchfield High School gym. It is the program's seventh regional title dating back to 2010.

"It doesn't get much better than this," Marquette head coach Cody Best said about winning the regional in his first year at the school.

The Explorers are now 21-12 on the season and advance to the Sectional Semifinals where they'll take on a tough Teutopolis team. The Wooden Shoes beat Robinson in their Regional Final game by a score of 59-40.

The main storyline of the night was the arrival of junior Jaden Rochester. For the third straight game, he's scored in double digits. He scored 12 points in the regular season finale against state-ranked Gibault and 12 again against Litchfield in the first round of the playoffs.



Friday night he exploded and scored 17 points against Pana; his career high.

"He's got that 'it' factor," Best said. "He's going to get a rebound, block a shot, but everybody believes in him. He's got all the confidence in the world right now."

“My teammates are trusting me,” Rochester said. “Sometimes they just need someone to step up and it was just my game to step up.”

“It’s huge,” Macias said about his teammate. “He’s always had it in him. He’s the most athletic guy on the court at all times. Today he played amazing, I’m so proud of the kid.”

Macias called the 6-foot-3 Rochester a “gentle giant”.

Also in double digits was senior Kendall Lavender with 12 points. Senior Jack Spain came off the bench and hit two huge threes in the second quarter, finishing the night with those six points.

Junior Sean Williams and Macias each scored three while senior Braden Kline, the team’s leading scorer, was held to just two points on the night.

Marquette got off to a good start and was up 10-7 after the first quarter.

Pana’s Devon Peebles hit a three to tie the game at 10 and then another basket to go ahead. This would be the Panthers’ final lead of the night.

Back-to-back baskets from Rochester and Spain’s two three-pointers grew Marquette’s lead to 22-14 at the half.

Pana tried to rally a comeback, but Marquette would not be denied. Rochester scored another five points in the third and Williams made a three to go up 33-20 after three.

Marquette didn’t make a field goal in the fourth quarter but made up for it by shooting a perfect 10-10 from the free-throw line. Those clutch shots turned out to be the difference maker for the Explorers.

They went on to win in front of a huge traveling fan section.

“We knew they were going to travel wherever we go,” Best said about the Blue Crew. “It was like a home game for us and that’s what we needed.”

“It means everything to me,” Macias said about the sea of blue shirts in the stands. “It’s awesome seeing them come support us. Truly, they are the sixth man. It helps us when they’re out there. They bring all the energy, it’s awesome.”

Marquette did their homework, watched the film, and things went pretty much exactly to plan. All year the team has been striving on their defense, and that work is paying off.

“We held them to 32 points, so I’d say we did our job,” Best said. “I’ll take that against anybody.”

The Explorers don’t plan on stopping anytime soon either. They believe they can beat T-Town and keep their season going.

“We’re going to be the underdog no matter who we play but we’ve got all the momentum in the world right now,” Best said.

“We’ve got momentum and we’re confident,” said Macias. “We think we can beat anyone.”

The Sectional Semifinal game against Teutopolis will be played Wednesday, March 1 at 7 p.m. in Newton.