

Crawford Sets More Records As Panthers Rally Past Springfield And Into Regional Finals

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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JERSEYVILLE - A fast start for the Jersey Panthers was entirely necessary Monday night.

Jersey got off to an 11-0 lead to open its regional semifinal game against Springfield, and it proved to be the difference maker in a close 57-53 win over the No. 4-seeded Senators.

“Obviously it was a big deal,” Jersey head coach Caleb Williams said about the fast start.

“We’ve been on the other end of that where we’ve dug ourselves a bit of a hole and it’s hard to come back. But did tonight and they took the lead for a while there. It got us quite nervous, but our girls dug down deep, made the adjustments, and we came out on top.”



The Panthers led 13-6 after the first quarter and after a three-pointer from Tessa Crawford midway through the second, Jersey took its largest lead at 21-10.

From there the Senators closed the half on a 9-2 run to cut the deficit to 23-19. They then opened the third quarter on a five-point run to take the lead at 24-23.

The teams swapped the lead 10 straight times until Meredith Gray's three to make it 35-33 Jersey. But still, Springfield came back, and thanks to a buzzer-beater three from Emma Scheffler, the Senators led 37-36 heading into the fourth.

"I'm sure it was fun for the fans, but for old coaches like me, it might take years off my life going back and forth like that," Williams joked about the multiple lead swaps.

Scheffler drilled another three to open the fourth quarter followed by a couple of free throws from Keziah Toran to take a 42-36 lead with 6:25 remaining in the game.

At that point, both Crawford and Gray were sitting with three fouls each. Not long after that, Ariana Williams fouled out for Springfield. She had fouled Crawford on a three-point attempt and as Crawford took to the line shooting three down 45-41, she made all three foul shots to cut it to 45-44 with 2:30 minutes left.



Crawford was fouled again and made one free throw to tie the game before coming down and hitting a clutch three from the corner to take a 48-45 lead. She followed that up with a three-point play and two more free throws.

She scored 12 straight points as she just about single-handedly rallied the Panthers to a 53-45 lead.

“She’s a competitor,” Williams said of Crawford. “Anytime we can get the ball in her hands and get her to the free throw line, we’re happy to do that.”

Crawford went 11 of 14 from the free-throw line. She made nine of those in the fourth quarter.

Springfield cut the lead to 53-49 with 34 seconds left after two free throws and a basket from Aniyah Rhinehouse, but Crawford made both foul shots at the other end to counteract as the Panthers were able to hold on for the win.

“I just thought we survived the peaks and valleys and I knew we could win this game if we kept persevering,” Crawford said after finishing the game with a team-high 29 points.

Gray added 11 points while Anna Kribs and Kallal each scored six for Jersey. Scheffler led the Senators with 16 points while Toran had 13.

Crawford had recently become the all-time leading scorer for Jersey and as of Monday night, she broke the single-season scoring record.

Crawford came into Monday’s game tied with the record at 633 points set back in the 1985-86 season by Lori Sebastian. After Crawford’s 29-point performance, she’s now scored 662 points in her senior season. She scored 550 as a junior which is fourth on the all-time list and 476 points as a sophomore which is tenth all-time.



Crawford is Jersey's leading scorer with 1,804 points as of Monday, followed by Kate Mortensen with 1,670 points, Amy Mortensen with 1,592 points, and Clare Breden with 1,555 points.

To go along with that, she also broke the all-time three-point record on Monday, having made 254 threes in her career.

But Crawford's not focused on all that. She just wants to win.

"I've never won a real regional game in my high school career, so this is a big deal to me," she said.

The Panthers won a regional quarterfinal game last season against Triad, but she doesn't count that because it was a play-in game.

The Panthers are still in the hunt for their first regional title since the 1999-2000 season, and it won't come easy.

They'll host top-seeded Quincy Notre Dame on Thursday, Feb. 15 at 7 p.m. for the regional championship.

QND beat Jacksonville 66-24 in its regional semifinal Monday night to improve to 26-4 on the season. The Raiders are currently ranked No. 3 in IHSA Class 3A by the Associated Press.

"Everybody knows Quincy Notre Dame is pretty good, but I think we've got a pretty good basketball team right now," Williams said.

"I know they're a really tough team, but I think we can prepare for them and handle them," Crawford added.