

# **Roxana's Second Half Adjustments Too Much For Piasa Birds - Shells Will Host Marquette For Regional Title**

by Bradley Piros, Reporter  
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ROXANA – In the second regional semifinal of the night inside Larry Milazzo Gymnasium, the No. 3 seeded Shells hosted the No. 6 seeded Southwestern Piasa Birds.

Thanks to a quick start and some second-half adjustments, Roxana went on to a 50-37 win, moving into the regional championship game on Friday, Feb. 23 against No. 2-seeded Marquette Catholic.

The Explorers dispatched No. 9-seeded Staunton 55-32 in the first semifinal.

The Shells came out firing on a 10-2 run which saw everyone get involved.

Trenton Holloway and Sean Maberry scored back-to-back baskets before Ian Brantley cut the lead in half at 4-2. But a six-point run that saw baskets from Evan Wells, Aidan Briggs, and Maberry pushed the lead to 10-2.

The quick start was enough to give the Shells a 15-10 lead after the first quarter.

Wells increased the lead to seven before Piasa started chipping away.

Cason Robinson and Brantley score to cut the lead to 17-14. Brantley and Calloway traded threes as Roxana led 22-17, but Brantley ended the half on an eight-point blitz.

His short-range jumper tied the game up at 22 before he sent Southwestern fans into a frenzy.

With time winding down Brantley had no choice but to shoot a deep three from the Shell logo that swished straight in at the buzzer, giving his team its first lead of the game at 25-22.

Brantley scored 21 of Piasa's 25 points in the first half.

It was a different story in the second half.

"We told Evan, 'What do you want out of this game?' We've got to find a way to stop the bleeding because we were gushing out at that point," Roxana head coach Mark Briggs said.

"Brantley, we had no answer for him. We told Wells to faceguard him, don't let him catch, make it tough, rise to the occasion."

Wells did just that, forcing Brantley into some awkward positions and getting him into foul trouble.

Brantley picked up his third foul with 6:24 remaining in the third quarter. He was pulled for the majority of that frame.

The Shells opened the half with a three-pointer from Briggs and a free throw from Wells to regain the lead at 26-25. Logan Keith took the lead back for Piasa, but only temporarily.

Roxana scored the next six points with back-to-back baskets from Briggs and another from Maberry to go up 32-27.

But the Piasa Birds answered right back with a six-point run to go ahead one last time at 33-32.

The Shells took the lead back for good after another three from Briggs followed by a basket from Maberry to close the quarter and lead 37-33 after three.

“Obviously we become a lot smaller, so we had to start doubling some guys underneath,” Southwestern head coach Jason Darr said regarding the third quarter without Brantley.

“Then, that opened up some perimeter shots. Briggs hit a couple of shots there in the third quarter that hurt us. But I mean overall, I thought we did a decent job.”

Down by four with an entire quarter left to play, Piasa still had more than a chance to win, but instead, the Shells outscored them 13-4 in the final frame to secure the win.

“We went about five minutes and didn’t score, it just killed us,” coach Darr said.

“That’s kind of the way we’ve been. Hopefully, we can get through that. We’ve got to kind of get over that hump. We can’t have three and four-minute scoring droughts in a basketball game. You got to go on a run at some point when that happens.”

For Roxana, its second-half changes helped out tenfold.

“It’s huge,” coach Briggs said. “We’ve made adjustments as coaches, but the players actually made the adjustments. The kids made the shots they needed to make.”

Briggs gave a lot of credit to one of his assistant coaches.

“My assistant coach Gerry Wheaton knows offense probably better than their kids know it. We did a great job of executing,” Briggs said.

After Brantley popped off for 21 first-half points, he was only allowed three more in the second. He led his team with 24 points while Keith added six, Peyton Kress had three, and Robinson and Ryan Lewis each had two.

Coach Darr always knew that Roxana was going to be a tough matchup for his guys.

“They’re a lot bigger and stronger than our kids,” he said. “Honestly, they’re just so much stronger that it’s hard for us to really play them straight man-to-man.”

Piasa’s season ends at 21-12. The team graduates three seniors in Keith, Kress, and Rocky Darr.

“It’s hard, especially when one of them is your son,” coach Darr said about losing this group of seniors. “It’s pretty hard, it was a tough locker room. But it is every year. I feel like these kids are like my own kids. By the time we spend four years together. That’s the hardest part of coaching, letting them go.”

But he’s still proud of the effort his team gave throughout the season.

“Solid season,” Darr said. “We won our county tournament; we won our tournament at our place for Christmas. I told them that it’s a great season. Any time you win 20 games in basketball it’s a pretty good season. We’ll take it. It wasn’t the ending we wanted, but it was a valiant effort by our kids.”

For the Shells, Maberry led with 16 points while Briggs had 14. Holloway and Wells each scored seven and Chris Walleck added six.

The Shells improve to 20-12 on the season and move on to the regional championship game, one which they get to host.

They will take on rivals Marquette Catholic on Friday, Feb. 23 at 7 p.m.

“It’s really now, Marquette, Southwestern, and Wood River. Rivals are the teams that you’re playing in big games against,” coach Briggs said.

The Explorers will be playing in their eighth straight regional final.

“Marquette’s kind of been in the way for a lot of people over the years,” Briggs said.

“But we’re very familiar with them. We’ve played them twice; we feel like we can compete with them. Physically, we match up well with them. And we’re at home. They have all the pressure on them.”

