

Explorers Win Fifth Regional Title In Six Years - Head To Sectional Semis Against Pleasant Plains

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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ROXANA – In 2022 it was Owen Williams; in 2023 the honor was given to Parker Macias.

And in 2024 it was Braden Kline's turn to hold up a regional plaque.

The Marquette Explorers beat the Roxana Shells 48-43 in the Class 2A Roxana Regional final Friday night. It was the program's third straight regional title and fifth in six years.

This year's Explorer senior group has won a regional title every year, excluding a Covid-shortened freshman season.

"Every year," Marquette head coach Cody Best said of his seniors. "You've got Covid, so you put an asterisk next to that one, who knows what would have happened, but yeah, they're three for three in opportunities that they could have won."

Overall, it was Marquette's 11th regional crown since the 2009-10 season.

This year's didn't come any easier than the rest.

Roxana got off to a hot start, opening the game on a 7-0 run thanks to baskets from Evan Wells and Aidan Briggs and then a three from Sean Maberry.

"It felt like about 15, but it was seven points, and we just battled back. We knew we weren't going to get it all back in one possession, but we stuck to what works this year, our bread and butter plays," Best said.

Marquette's forte is scoring in transition, especially three-pointers.

After Sean Williams made a couple of free throws, he later dropped in a three to cut the lead to 7-5.

Marquette kept pace but still trailed 18-14 after the first quarter.

Williams opened the second quarter with another triple to get within a point before Brody Bechtold drilled a three to go ahead 20-18, Marquette's first lead of the game.

The Shells tied it back up at 20 and it was tied again at 23 before Chris Walleck dropped in a long-range shot to give the Shells a 26-23 lead heading into the locker room.

The Explorers opened up the second half on a 10-point run thanks to two baskets from Jaden Rochester and back-to-back threes from Jaylen Cawthron that saw Marquette take a 33-26 lead.

Marquette was able to turn its defense into offense in the third quarter. And it was a simple change really.

“We meant man-to-man,” Best said.

“I’m more of a zone guy, but shout out to my assistant coach Brad Kline, he said let’s go man. He knows these kids, he’s been around them longer than I have, so we stuck with it, and all the props to him.”

“It’s disappointing because the 1-3-1 was what killed us the first two times we played them,” Roxana head coach Mark Briggs said. “We destroyed their man-to-man in the first two games. We just didn’t come out and get any momentum. Never got any flow and it hurt us.”

The Explorers beat Roxana 56-36 in Alton back on Dec. 22 and 50-30 in the second game of the Litchfield Tournament on Jan. 16.

After going up 39-32 after three quarters, the Explorers were able to hold the Shells at bay in the fourth, making free throws down the stretch to ensure the win.

Best was glad to be walking off Roxana’s floor with the win.

“It’s their home court, we knew it was going to be a dog fight,” he said. “We knew they weren’t going to lie down; they’re too physical and they’re smart kids. They gave us a heck of a punch in the first half, but we punched back with our five seniors.”

It’s worth mentioning that both schools brought their A-game when it came to their student sections as chants echoed throughout Larry Milazzo Gymnasium all game.

“I love the Blue Crew, all the fans, the community has stuck with us. We’re still battling, and we’re not done yet,” Best said.

After a quick start from Williams, he ended up leading all scorers with 16 points, a career-high for him.

“Tonight was Sean Williams,” Best said. “I love that kid. He’ll do anything for anybody out here. He’s our leader, he’s our heart and soul.”

“Williams was a difference in this game too. He’s kind of the x-factor for them,” Briggs said.

Along with William’s career night, the Explorers got 12 points from Kline, nine from Cawthorn, eight from Rochester, and three from Bechtold.

The Shells were led by Maberry with 15 points and Walleck with 14. Briggs and Trenton Holloway each scored five and Michael Silas and Wells each had two.

Roxana's season comes to a close at 20-13.

"It was a great year," Briggs said. "Any time you win 20 games and miss two weeks of practice to start the year. We missed 12 practices, so I've got to be proud of how the kids came out and responded to a year that was a little difficult to get off the ground."

Roxana's basketball boot camp got off to a late start as many of those players were making a deep run in the football postseason which ran long into November.

The Shells graduate seven seniors.

"The great thing about what I get to do every day is I get to have program kids," Briggs said.

"These kids come through since the second grade, we already know who we're going to get, year after year. Nobody moves out, nobody moves in, and it's a pleasure coaching them."

Marquette improves to 25-8 and moves into the Beardstown Sectional semifinal on Tuesday, Feb. 27. The Explorers will take on No. 4-seeded Pleasant Plains, 64-60 winners over top-seeded Hamilton-Warsaw.

The other sectional semifinal is between No. 1 Auburn and No. 5 Williamsville on Wednesday. The sectional championship is on Friday, March 1 at 7 p.m.

"We set three goals at the beginning of the season: under 10 losses, get to the sectional championship, and win the conference. Unfortunately, we didn't get the conference, but we're still going for those other two," Williams said.

"We set our goals at the beginning of the year and those seniors set them high," Best said, "but they know what they're capable of. It's a special group."