

OPINION THROUGH MY LENS

Oh the bounty of the boys state tourney



By NATE BEIER
Sports Editor

THE DIVISION 5 FIELD: What lies ahead for Royall at state

By ZACH RASTALL
HSE Sports Reporter

It feels a little strange to call anyone an underdog when you're talking in terms of the state boys' basketball tournament. After all, any team fortunate enough to be down there is part of the elite group of four from all of Wisconsin that's still alive in their division.

That said, there still is naturally some kind of expected pecking order within each division's seeded field of four, and the Royall Panthers are in the underdog role as the No. 4 seed in Division 5.

But that's a role that suits them just fine. This is a Royall team that — like everyone else in the league — still plays second fiddle to powerhouse Bangor in the Scenic Bluffs Conference. Plus, despite being the No. 1 seed in their part of the playoff draw, the Panthers internally felt like there were not many outside of Elroy and Kendall who viewed them as the team to beat to get to state from their sectional.

"It's just fun to be an underdog," said Royall junior guard Ty Wildes. "Nobody

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Royall's student section worriedly watches to see if a Panther free throw will sink into the net during the second half of Saturday's sectional championship game against Wauzeka-Steuben. HSE photo by Logan Everson.

The Royall boys basketball team swarms around the Division 5 sectional championship plaque after qualifying for state with a 58-40 win over Wauzeka-Steuben Saturday night. HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

ROYALL RETURNS TO STATE



STATE

Royall rolls past Wauzeka-Steuben to earn first sectional title since 2010

By ZACH RASTALL
HSE Sports Reporter

WISCONSIN DELLS — It was a moment two years in the making. The Royall boys' basketball team navigated their way back to the sectional finals to go against the same Wauzeka-Steuben team that had dashed their state tournament dreams in 2021. But this time, the Panthers weren't going to be denied their ticket to Madison.

No. 1 seed Royall (22-7) left no doubt in its pursuit of a state trip by defeating No. 4 seed Wauzeka-Steuben (21-7) 58-40 in a WIAA Division 5 sectional final Saturday, March 11 in Wisconsin Dells.

Just two years prior, the Hornets scratched out a 46-41 victory over the Panthers in the sectional finals to earn a spot at the state tournament.

The rematch between these two schools pitted a pair of squads with a clear contrast in how they find success. Royall lacks the star power of some other top teams, but they have a deep eight-man rotation where a handful of players could be the leading scorer on any given night. Wauzeka-Steuben's success this season was centered around senior guard and UW-Platteville commit Seth Bunders, who was averaging 25.3 points per game going into the sectional finals.

The Panthers delivered the first blow on Saturday by racing out to an early 8-0 lead. But the Hornets were quick to respond with a 13-0 run of their own — during which Bunders scored 10 — to surge ahead 13-8. Royall threw a

counterpunch of its own with a 10-0 run and wouldn't trail again en route to a 27-19 halftime advantage.

Bunders made a pair of free throws for the first points of the second half, but the Panthers ripped off a 13-0 run to extend their lead to 19. Wauzeka-Steuben never got closer than a 12-point deficit the rest of the way.

Royall junior guard Ty Wildes set the pace for his team with 16 points and five rebounds off the bench, senior guard Bryce Olson scored 12 points, senior guard Brady Uppena posted a double-double with 11 points and 10 rebounds, sophomore small forward Carter Uppena recorded eight points, six rebounds and three assists, junior forward Tucker Wildes finished with six points and seven rebounds and senior forward Gabe Keenan chipped in five points.

As a team, the Panthers were a stellar 6 of 11 from 3-point range.

UP NEXT:
FRIDAY, MARCH 17

Royall vs. Wausau Newman

KOHL CENTER, MADISON

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The Uppena Brothers: Brady (44) and Carter (34). HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media



New generation adds own touch to family legacy

By ZACH RASTALL
HSE Sports Reporter

From the time since his sons, Brady and Carter, were just young kids, current Royall head boys' basketball coach Scott Uppena would bring them down to Madison each March to watch the state tournament together at the Kohl Center.

Those trips became a treasured annual tradition, and one that served as an inspiration for achieving the ultimate dream when Brady and Carter reached high school.



Former longtime Cassville head coach Dennis Uppena (center) watches Royall's Division 5 sectional final game while surrounded by family. Uppena helped guide Cassville to seven state appearances between 1991-2000, including state titles in 1999, 95 and 2000. HSE photo by Nate Beier.

"It basically became our vacation time. I would take them out of school Thursday and Friday, stay for the championships on Saturday and come home," Scott said. "It became something that was a yearly tradition for us. Part of that yearly tradition was a conversation about how cool it would be to maybe play here someday."

Like all those years before, the Uppenas are headed to Madison for another state tournament experience this March. But this time, they'll be turning that family dream into a reality as part of a Royall team that's going to

state for just the second time in program history.

With Brady currently finishing out his senior year at Royall, this season was the last chance for all of them reach the state stage together. In fact, this ultimately was the only year Brady and Carter (currently a sophomore) got to play together in high school after Brady missed the entire 2021-22 season with an ACL tear.

The brothers have just one more weekend of high school basketball to

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BOYS BASKETBALL

Panthers surge ahead of Hillsboro in sectional semis



Royall's Bryce Olson runs away with the ball after intercepting it in Tiger territory in the first half of the sectional semifinal against Hillsboro in Richland Center on Friday, March 10. HSE photo by Logan Everson.

By ZACH RASTALL
HSE Sports Reporter

A rubber match of epic proportions for Scenic Bluffs rivals Hillsboro and Royall brought with it a spot in the sectional finals in addition to the usual bragging rights. The third time around for these two teams, it was the Panthers who rose to the occasion with the stakes at their highest.

No. 1 seed Royall (21-7) asserted its dominance with a 63-45 victory over No. 2 seed Hillsboro (21-7) in their WIAA Division 5 sectional semifinal showdown Friday, March 10 in Richland Center. The game was originally scheduled for a day earlier, but a winter storm that moved through Wisconsin Thursday led to it being postponed.

The two meetings between Hillsboro and Royall in the regular season saw each home team win: the Tigers won 53-38 in Hillsboro on January 19 and the Panthers won 74-68 in the rematch in Elroy on February 20. That created a feeling that any result might be on the table in a sectional clash at a neutral site.

On Friday night, an 11-4 lead for the Panthers led to a Hillsboro timeout 6.5 minutes into the game. The Tigers responded by scoring the next five points before Royall pushed its advantage out to 17-9. Hillsboro would tie the game at 17-17 but never jumped ahead. The Panthers later ended the half on a 7-0 run to hold a 29-21 lead at the break.

The Tigers trailed by six early on in the second half,

but Royall pulled away and led by as much as 23 at one point en route to the 18-point victory.

"The kids buy into that because, it's not sometimes something that's really flashy, but it's effective. Especially when you get to the tournament."

- Scott Uppena, Royall head coach

Right from the start, the Panthers came out looking to establish themselves inside with junior forward Tucker Wildes and senior forward Gabe Keenan. Once they found success in the post, shots opened up around the perimeter and they made 5 of 12 3-pointers on the evening as a team.

Wildes set a new career high by scoring 18 points in Royall's regional final win over Cochrane-Fountain City. He followed that up by matching his 18-point

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"My teammates were finding me on inside-out kicks, and I was just draining those threes," Ty Wildes said. "We haven't done it since 2010, so it feels amazing to go to state."

For the Hornets, Bunders put up a game-high 26 points and senior guard Caydon Lomas scored nine points. Bunders was coming off an electric 53-point performance in his team's sectional semifinal win over Potosi.

Royall came into the evening with the clear plan to make life difficult for Bunders and not allow him to get in any kind of easy rhythm. When he brought the ball past halfcourt, he was often met by an aggressive Royall double team. Olson was given the task of being the main defender on Bunders and handled his role admirably while playing heavy minutes.

"I feel like most of it's mental," Olson said. "I just needed to keep it in my head that he's more tired than I am."

Both teams had played one night earlier due to their respective sectional semifinal matchups being postponed from their original Thursday dates because of inclement weather. Royall's depth allowed them to navigate both the quick turnaround and some foul trouble, while Bunders appeared at times to be dealing with some fatigue and his 26 points didn't come easily or efficiently.

Thanks to their comprehensive performance, the Panthers now join the 2009-10 team as the only squads in program history to earn a spot at state.

"That's been my goal since the first day I stepped on the court with the kids at Royall 10 years ago — I wanted the opportunity to be able to take kids to a state tournament and have them experience what I experienced," said Royall head coach Scott Uppena, who played on state championship teams at Cassville in the 1990s. "There are no egos on this team, they're all



Royall's Jacob Dragan leaps to his feet after taking a charge from Wauzeka-Stauben's Seth Bunders in the second half of Saturday's Division 5 sectional final game in Wisconsin Dells. HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

unselfish. We built this team to be balanced, we built this team around defense. They trusted the process and what we wanted them to do."

THE CASSVILLE CONNECTION

When Royall's Scott Uppena and Wauzeka-Stauben's Isaiah Okey squared off in the sectional finals last weekend for the second time in the last three years, they did so while carrying on a proud legacy through their shared Cassville connection.

Uppena and Okey are both names synonymous with basketball success in Cassville, with Scott's dad Dennis Uppena coaching the Comets to three state titles and seven state

appearances during his 29-year Hall of Fame coaching career. The peak of that came when Cassville was led in the 1990s by Isaiah's older cousin and all-time Wisconsin high school basketball legend Sam Okey.

Scott (a classmate of Sam) graduated from Cassville in 1995 and Isaiah graduated in 2011, but both played under Dennis, who was in attendance in Wisconsin Dells for Saturday's sectional final.

"His basketball tree is pretty special. He does a great job of teaching kids life lessons and what's important in life," Scott said. "That's why a lot of his former players become coaches — simply because they want to have the same influence he had

on them on their own kids." "I respected Denny a lot. I really loved playing for him," Isaiah said. "He had great expectations, great morals and I think we both live by those and carry on his legacy a little bit."

With his son coaching and a couple grandsons playing for Royall, there wasn't any doubt who Dennis was rooting for Saturday evening. But his pride in Isaiah was evident, and it was a special treat to see two former players go toe to toe for a spot at state.

"It was fantastic. Isaiah's a great kid. He started for me for three years at point guard. He understands the game, knows it well," Dennis said. "I couldn't lose today, really. This is just a little better though."



Royall's Tucker Wildes works his way between Wauzeka-Stauben's Cooper and Cayden Lomas in the first half of the sectional final in Wisconsin Dells on Saturday, March 11. HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.



Royall's Gabe Keenan looks for helping hands in Saturday's sectional final against Wauzeka-Stauben at Wisconsin Dells. HSE photo by Logan Everson.



Hillsboro's Miles Ravenscroft drives around a pick set up by Russell Jackson against Royall's Brady Uppena in Friday's sectional semifinal in Richland Center. **HSE photo by Logan Everson.**

PARTY LIKE IT'S 2010



The 2010 version of the Royall boys basketball team rush to meet each other after winning their sectional game against Chippewa Falls McDonell in Onalaska. The Panthers defeated the Macks 47-42 to move on to state in the last year of the old four division system. Royall faced eventual state champion, Randolph, in the state semis, losing 63-35 in their state debut. **HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**

SEMIS

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performance with another against Hillsboro.

"Our game is built inside out, so anytime we get the ball inside, we either score or kick it out for a three and that's a quality shot," Wildes said. "I'm a lot more aggressive than I have been in the past. (Shots) are starting to fall."

In addition to Wildes's 18 points and nine rebounds, Royall had Keenan and senior guard Bryce Olson with 12 points apiece, senior guard Brady Uppena with eight points and six rebounds and junior guard Ty Wildes with seven points, six rebounds and three assists.

Last Friday night marked the fourth time in four playoff games that a different player led Royall in scoring.

"It's a locker room full of kids that buy into something that's bigger than themselves. We don't have superstars on our team. We are very balanced and that's how we built the team, with a defensive mindset," said Royall head coach Scott Uppena. "The kids buy into that because, it's not sometimes something that's really flashy, but it's effective. Especially when you get to the tournament."

As for the Tigers, junior guard/forward Isaiah Stokes put up a game-high 19 points and hauled in five rebounds, senior guard Noah Burmaster tallied eight points and four rebounds and junior guard Talan Hildreth added six points.

"Royall straight up just outplayed us tonight in just about every aspect of the game," said Hillsboro head

"While it hurts now, it's a reminder that they did do something special this year and they're going to be able to hang their hat on that the rest of their lives."

— Jordan Polk, Hillsboro head coach

coach Jordan Polk. "They're a fantastic team: well coached, well rounded — they're just playing really well right now. They came and they outplayed us tonight and it showed on the court."

Despite a disappointing end to the season, Polk noted that his message to the team afterward — especially to his seniors — emphasized the many things they did accomplish during a winter to remember in Hillsboro.

"For the seniors, they've laid the foundation of where this program can go. Twenty-one wins, a regional title — there have been a lot of very good teams that have come out of Hillsboro that haven't played in a sectional game," Polk said. "While it hurts now, it's a reminder that they did do something special this year and they're going to be able to hang their hat on that the rest of their lives."

LEGACY

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share as teammates, but it will come on the grandest stage they can reach.

"Being able to play with (Brady) on a high school floor is a dream I've had since I was really little," Carter said. "Preparing for our last weekend together is surreal at this point. I just want to do the best that we can do."

The father-son state experience is sure to be a special one for Scott and his sons, but it's far from the first time that dynamic has been shared within the Uppena family. This is just the latest chapter in a family basketball legacy that spans several decades and multiple generations.

Scott's father, Dennis Uppena, spent 29 seasons as the head coach of the Cassville boys' basketball team during a career that landed him in the Wisconsin Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) Hall of Fame. During his tenure, the Comets compiled a 441-237 record that included three state championships (1994, 1995, 2000), three state runner-up finishes (1992, 1993, 1999) and one other state appearance (1991) that made Cassville a state basketball power.

Dennis and his late wife Jane had five children — Mark, Mike, Scott, Laura and Tom — who all forged basketball careers from a young age. All four sons played for their dad at Cassville, with Mike, Scott and Tom all making it to state at least once under him.

Each of the four brothers have followed in their father's footsteps into coaching and three are currently the head varsity coaches of boys' basketball teams: Mike at Potosi, Scott at Royall and Tom at Darlington. As part of his coaching career, Mark spent five years as the head coach of the Lancaster boys in the early 2000s and another three seasons at the helm of the Lancaster girls from 2019 to 2022.

Tom's first season at the helm at Darlington ended with the Redbirds finishing as the 2017 state runner-up in Division 4. His extended family was naturally down in Madison to support him,



Royall coach Scott Uppena accepts a congratulatory hug from brother Mike, following Saturday's game. Mike, who is the head coach at Potosi, had his season come to a close the night before with a loss to Wauzeka-Steuben. **HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.**

though Brady remembers making sure that when he wished his uncle good luck, he did so without setting foot on the Kohl Center court itself.

Brady's goal for himself was to not go out on that floor until he was doing it as part of a team playing at the state tournament.

"I told myself 'I don't ever want to touch this floor unless I'm playing on it.' I kept that true. I went up and gave Tom a hug and I told him good luck, but I told him to come off the court. I don't think he understood why, and I didn't tell him why either," Brady said. "I've had many opportunities to touch that Kohl Center floor, but I wanted it to be for this purpose."

The Uppena clan will be on hand to watch Brady, Carter and Scott fulfill their state dream together this weekend, including Dennis. He nearly had the chance to watch Scott and Mike coach against one another in last Saturday's sectional final, but Potosi fell to Wauzeka-Steuben — who is coached by another one of Dennis's former players, Isaiah Okey — in the sectional semifinals.

Royall took care of business against Wauzeka-Steuben

"It was something that was a dream. In a lot of ways, we're living that right now. Sometimes it's even hard to talk about because when you have those goals and all of a sudden those goals become a reality, those emotions do set in and sometimes take over your thoughts."

— Scott Uppena, Royall head coach

to win the sectional title in Wisconsin Dells with Dennis and his family in the stands. It's yet another wonderful basketball memory for the Uppenas to add to the long list they've put together over the years.

"It just doesn't get any better than that. You can't say much else other than that," Dennis said. "Those are the things that you hope for — your kids and your grandkids. I'm just so happy."

Scott and his sons can't get too caught up in the moment when they take the floor at the Kohl Center since they'll

be devoting all their focus to competing for a state championship. But after so many state tournament experiences over the years, obviously this weekend is going to be something for them to cherish and share for the rest of their lives.

"It was something that was a dream. In a lot of ways, we're living that right now," Scott said. "Sometimes it's even hard to talk about because when you have those goals and all of a sudden those goals become a reality, those emotions do set in and sometimes take over your thoughts."



Hillsboro's Isaiah Stokes leaps into an Uppena sandwich while going up for two inside the lane during the second half of the sectional semifinal in Richland Center against Royall. **HSE photo by Logan Everson.**

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expects you to win, so when you do, it's that much better."

The next challenge for the Panthers (22-7) in this memorable postseason run comes when they face No. 1 seed Newman Catholic (25-4) out of Wausau in the Division 5 state semifinals Friday, March 17 at 9:05 a.m. at the Kohl Center in Madison.

The Fighting Cardinals boast a formidable starting lineup that's headlined by senior guard Mason Prey, who is averaging 23.5 points, 4.5 assists and 1.9 steals per game. Joining him in the backcourt is fellow senior guard Isaac Seidel and his 19.1 points and 4.0 assists per game. Senior guard Connor Krach averages a double-double with 10.6 points and 10.5 rebounds per game.

Other Newman Catholic starters are senior guard Jackson Pfender (7.8 ppg) and senior forward Eli Gustafson (5.7 ppg, 8.4 rpg), with senior guard Thomas Bates coming off the



Since school is cancelled on Friday, Royall can expect the spirit of their fellow students to cheer them on in the opening round of the WIAA Division 5 state tournament game. **HSE photo by Logan Everson.**

bench.

"They're tough. They put up a lot of points, they get up and down the floor and they're very efficient with the ball," said Royall head coach Scott Uppena. "They're not deep into the bench though. They only play one

person off the bench. So, we're looking to exploit that a little bit if we can. Either way, when you get to this level, you have to play well to win. And we're going to try to do our best."

The winner of the Royall-Newman Catholic semifinal

advances to face either No. 2 seed McDonell Central Catholic (28-1) or No. 3 seed Fall River (26-3) in the Division 5 state championship game Saturday, March 18 at 11:05 a.m.

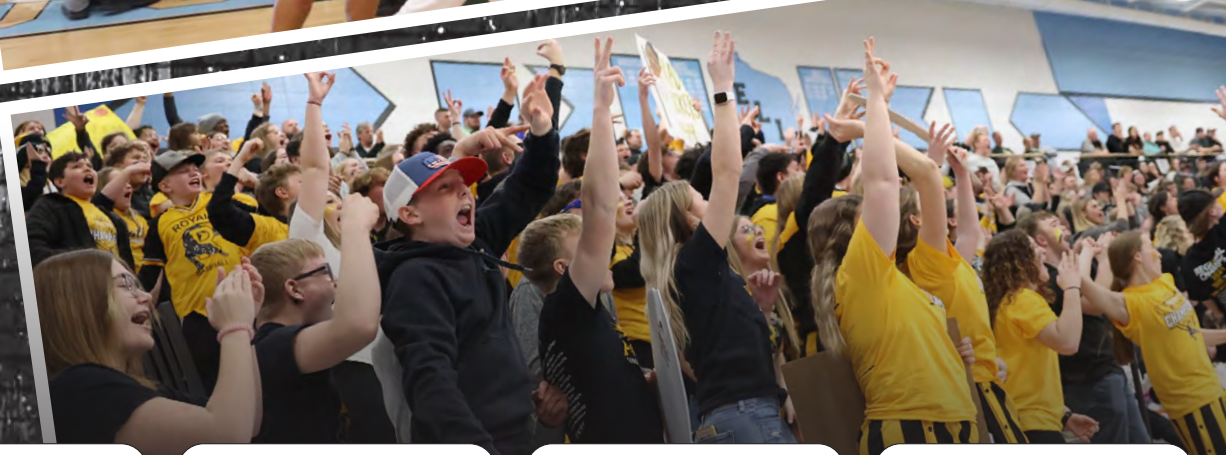
Obviously, Royall isn't going to Madison with the mindset of just being happy to be there. Bringing home some additional hardware is the goal. But no matter what happens next for this team, they've already created memories for themselves and the community that will last a lifetime.

"The only time they've gone to state at Royall in basketball is 13 years ago. And there's a shrine when you come into school that's built around that experience and what it meant for that community," Uppena said. "Obviously we're going to add to that now, and hopefully we go down there and represent the school well. That's what we want to do. But we're not satisfied with where it's at now. We certainly want to make sure we do our best when we get down there and we'll see what happens."

2023 WIAA DIVISION 5

STATE BOUND

ROYALL BOYS BASKETBALL



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- # 32 TYRUS WILDES
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- # 34 CARTER UPPENA
- # 40 GABE KEENAN
- # 43 LANDON LIPKE
- # 44 BRADY UPPENA
- # 50 COLE EBERHARDT
- # 54 DYLAN VELAZQUEZ

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