

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 five 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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So, there's always a buzz around the WIAA boys state basketball tournament, but this year it hits home a little differently than most.

Why is it different? Well, for one, there are a half dozen teams that are playing at this year's state tournament that I consider part of the GX3 Media coverage zone.

One of those happens to be my high school, Royall.

Yeah, I remember being in Onalaska back in 2010 when Royall made the improbable trip to state - the first ever for that program and the first ever for a Scenic Bluffs boys basketball team - and I was on cloud nine.

This time around, I was just as thrilled, though, it was different as my attachment to my school has changed over the past decade or so.

You see, I graduated from Royall back in 2001. From that point on I was tied very closely to our athletics programs and did highlight films as well as photography. My world was still pretty small in 2010 and I was still quite involved in what Royall and the rest of the SBC was doing.

Over the course of the last 13 years, however, I've just branched out more. I cover more teams, just less in-depth.

That doesn't mean I can't enjoy what happened Saturday night, or the wild ride we'll go through Friday morning at the Kohl Center in Madison, but it's different.

Having Royall at state is significant, but I look at what I get to cover this week and the slate of teams is remarkable.

Royall and Chippewa Falls McDonell give me some fun in Division 5, while Onalaska Luther and Whitehall face off in Division 4, meaning I'll have one or the other playing for a title on Saturday.

West Salem is the team to beat in Division 3, and I've had a long standing relationship with that community and coach, so you bet I'm ready for that action.

In Division 2, La Crosse Central proved everyone wrong and wiggled through its section for yet another chance at a title.

What's the point of this list? Well, sheesh, if you're a local basketball fan, there's something to keep your attention nearly every session of the boys state basketball tournament this year.

I've said this before and I'll reiterate again - winning is hard and getting to state is not an easy thing to do.

We've been blessed that, since 2010, we've had five Scenic Bluffs teams play at state with this year's Royall team being the sixth. Of the five that have played, three have brought home hardware. Hillsboro shocked the area with a romp to the D5 title game in 2016, taking second. Bangor won it in 2018 and nearly went back to the finals the next year, but then wrapped up a second place finish in 2022. So, bringing home the hardware isn't impossible for our area.

Can Royall defy the odds this year and do the same? Well, there's only one way to find out - tune in or show up in person and support our local hoopsters.