

Freshman free throws send Lady Thunderbirds to state

Lakeland earns first state berth in 30 years

Brett LaBore

OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

All season long, the Lakeland girls' basketball team had a goal of reaching the state tournament. Playing the team that knocked them out last year, the Thunderbirds proved it was their year as they came out with a dramatic victory to send them to

state.

First, the Thunderbirds soundly beat top-seeded New London 77-46 on Thursday in Antigo. Then on Saturday in Medford, the Thunderbirds beat one-seeded Menomonie 60-59 in a WIAA Division 2 sectional final game to send the Thunderbirds to state for the first time in 30 years. Freshman Ava Evenhouse sank two clutch free throws that proved to be the difference.

"It feels amazing. Our team's worked so hard for



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Ava Evenhouse makes the go-ahead and game-winning free throw in the second half of a WIAA Division 2 sectional final game vs. Menomonie Saturday, March 4 at Raider Hall in Medford. Evenhouse grabbed an offensive rebound that led to the free throws.



BRETT LABORE/LAKELAND TIMES

Julianna Ouimette drives the ball in the paint during the second half of a WIAA Division 2 sectional semifinal game against New London Thursday, March 2 at Sheldon Fieldhouse in Antigo. Julianna Ouimette scored a combined 53 points to lead her team to two victories.

this one. I'm so happy for everyone," Julianna Ouimette said.

New London

"I was happy with the way we attacked right from the beginning," coach Melissa Ouimette said. "I think we set the tone right away."

The Thunderbirds dominated the Bulldogs with a wire-to-wire win at Sheldon Fieldhouse in Antigo.

Transition points were key for the Thunderbirds early on. Julianna Ouimette found Lily Fortier (13 points) down the court for the first two points of the game.

Later on, Fortier made a layup with the foul to give the Thunderbirds three more points.

"For me my thing is it's either shooter or if you can sprint down the court. Our team really likes each other,

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Bulldogs' late run eliminates Thunderbirds

Brett LaBore

OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

With the playoffs underway, it was a brand new season for Lakeland boys' basketball. They opened up with New London on the road in a close game that came down to the final few minutes.

New London, the four-seed, came away with a 65-57 victory over the Thunderbirds in a WIAA Division 2 regional semifinal game.

"I thought all year long they played really hard and this was no different. A lot of seniors don't want to lose their last basketball game, stave off the end as best they can. They played courageously, tried to make plays ... diving for a rebound on the floor, grabbing rebounds," coach Rich

Fortier said. "A little more urgent from our boys on the hustle play situations."

The last time these two teams met, the Bulldogs won by a point. It proved to be a close game again with the Thunderbirds taking the lead after one half.

Lakeland leading scorer Will Fortier came out hitting shots. He had eight of the game's first 10 points with a bucket in the paint, a stepback 3-pointer and a triple that came on an assist from Evan Wewasson-Daubon.

Will Fortier also had a block early against New London's leading scorer Kyle Wisniewski. Wisniewski was held to just four points in the first half.

Carter Quade made one of his three 3-

pointer of the night on an assist from Ryan Carlson. It was a strong start for the Thunderbirds, up 11-4. They were successful in breaking the Bulldogs' press early on.

"I thought we took the crowd out of it," coach Fortier said. "A good student section, and they weren't able to really get into our heads cause we kind of controlled the first bit of the game."

Jonah Schlueter gave the Bulldogs their first triple of the game. Will Fortier answered with a 3-pointer of his own. Danny Gahler had the assist.

Ayden Kanaman extended possessions for the Bulldogs. He had an offensive rebound with

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BRETT LABORE/LAKELAND TIMES

Danny Gahler scores a basket with the foul during the second half of a WIAA Division 2 regional semifinal game against New London Friday, March 3 at New London High School. Gahler scored eight points off the bench.

Late

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and keep ourselves within shouting distance and a chance to win the game," coach Fortier said.

Wiczek made a shot from the post. Gahler knocked down a free throw before he grabbed an offensive rebound off his own miss for two points. Will Fortier hit a turnaround jumper that gave them a one-point advantage.

Wisniewski came right back for two points that gave the Bulldogs a lead. Then, Will Fortier made a little floater to get the lead back again. Both team's leading scorers were

scoring at a high level in a competitive game.

Down by three points with 3:45 left, Quade knocked down a huge 3-pointer from the wing to tie the game at 53-53. Carlson had the assist.

Will Fortier then gave the Thunderbirds the outright lead at 55-53. He led the Thunderbirds with 25 points on seven baskets, three triples, and a perfect 8/8 from the free throw line.

Like he had done all half, Wisniewski came up clutch with another basket. He then made two free throws in the bonus as the Thunderbirds turned the ball over late due to their press.

"We turned the ball over, picked it

up in places we usually don't pick it up near the timeline, at the timeline. Their pressure right around mid-court and over mid-court definitely hurt us," coach Fortier said. "They wait for the opening and (when the) opening comes, they sneak in and go down the door. They took advantage, and that's to their credit."

Trailing again, the Thunderbirds had a shot to tie or take the lead. Wiczek missed a 3-pointer before fouling out of the game.

Brett Krause missed the front end of a one-and-one, but the Bulldogs got the offensive rebound. Krause got a second chance, making both of his free throws.

"They pounded the glass on the inside, and we did the best job we could to keep guys off the o-board. They were long and they were athletic," coach Fortier said.

The Thunderbirds could not get any of their 3-point jumpers to fall. Wisniewski iced the game with four straight made free throws. He had 26 second half points to give him 30 points in the game. He made 14/16 free throws as he led his team to victory.

The loss ends the Thunderbirds' season at 13-12.

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we're all connected to each other," Fortier said. "It works out, and hopefully I get a foul. Normally it works out like that."

In addition to the fastbreak, Saylor Timmerman (17 points) proved to be a force in the paint. She had four points early, both baskets assisted by Kristina Ouimette. Timmerman also blocked or affected many of the Bulldogs' shots throughout the night.

"I think we all (played) together really well tonight on defense and each of us did what we did best, and it all just worked together in the end," Bobbi Lee said.

Whenever the Bulldogs made a little run, the Thunderbirds had the answer. Kristina Ouimette (20 points) banked in a 3-pointer before she made another triple coming off a screen.

Julianna Ouimette led all scorers with 23 points. She had a triple from the wing in the first half. Fortier then assisted her on a layup as the

Thunderbirds continued to share the basketball.

"For us it's all about being unselfish. Always give the person the extra pass, the extra shot. You don't want to be 'I'm taking it.' No, you want to pass it on," Fortier said. "We always try to get everybody on the point scoring, we want everybody to score."

New London leading scorer Lizzie Steingraber had the hot hand for the Bulldogs as she tried to keep them in the game. She had 15 first half points which included two triples.

The Bulldogs had a chance to cut into the lead before the half. Instead, Fortier scored in transition once again with the assist to Julianna Ouimette. It was at least a four-point swing as the Thunderbirds led 38-22 at halftime.

"I think it was mainly our attitudes," Lee said. "We all came in and had a positive inspirational talk in the locker room ... we got to keep doing what we do best and stay strong and we'll get through it."

Coming out of halftime, the Thunderbirds kept their foot



BRETT LABORE/LAKELAND TIMES

Isabel Johnson cuts down a piece of the net following Lakeland's 60-59 win over Menomonie in a WIAA Division 2 sectional final game Saturday, March 4 at Raider Hall in Medford. The win gives Lakeland their first state appearance since 1993.

on the gas pedal. Timmerman had five points to open up the second half including an and-one basket, making her free

throw.

Cale Quade made passes to Kristina Ouimette and Timmerman that resulted in bas-

kets.

The Bulldogs went on a little 6-0 run thanks to a basket by Steingraber, a triple by Jensen Mix and a free throw from Macy Reybrock to cut the lead to 11 points.

Lakeland didn't blink. Kristina Ouimette and Ava Evenhouse combined to go on a 6-0 run themselves to get Lakeland's lead back up to 17 points.

The Thunderbirds were 3-0 so far in the postseason, winning by 30-plus points each game. They were playing some of their best basketball all season.

"I think it's crazy how good we've been playing lately, and I think it just shows how much better we've gotten and how much we've improved and the strides that we've taken," Alyssa Erickson said. "I think we can make it all the way, and I think this win proves it. I think our defense was really good."

Steingraber led the Bulldogs with 21 points on nine field goals and a free throw. Mix added nine points while Reybrock knocked down a couple of triples.

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LOCAL SCOREBOARD

BASKETBALL PREP BOYS' BASKETBALL GNC Standings as of Saturday, March 4. Includes team records for x-Medford, Northland Pines, Mosinee, Rhinelander, Lakeland, Antigo, Tomahawk, and Friday's Games.

Medford 4-8 6-19, Northland Pines 2-10 3-19, Tomahawk 0-12 6-18. Includes FIRST TEAM, SECOND TEAM, HONORABLE MENTION, Lakeland vs. New London, Lakeland vs. Menomonie, and All-Great Northern Conference Team.

WOODRUFF LANES Woodruff Country Girls Wednesday, March 1. Includes High Game, Team High Series, and ISLAND CITY LANES Thursday Men's Major Bowling League.

GYMNASTICS PREP GYMNASTICS GNC Small Division Standings as of Saturday, March 4. Includes Team, Pts, Reg Trny, and W-L-T.

LOCAL SCHEDULE

Tuesday, March 7 -Off- Wednesday, March 8 -Off- Thursday, March 9 -Off- Friday, March 10 Lakeland girls' basketball vs. Pewaukee at Green Bay (State Semifinal) - 1:35 p.m. Saturday, March 11 Lakeland Nordic Ski at Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada - TBD. Saturday, March 12 -Off- Monday, March 13 Lakeland Nordic Ski at Fairbanks, Alaska - TBD.

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“I think we’re hungry for the win and we really want the win so we came here and we worked our butts off all season, and I think it’s time for us to show it,” Erickson said.

Menomonie

No lead was greater than seven points as the Mustangs and Thunderbirds traded baskets in an electric atmosphere at Raider Hall in Medford.

Menomonie’s Mary Berg made one of her four triples in the game to open up the scoring.

Julianna Ouimette (30 points) made plays all game, scoring half the team’s points. She got the Thunderbirds their first lead with layups on back-to-back possessions.

The Thunderbirds’ defense gave the Mustangs trouble early on. Timmerman and Kristina Ouimette had blocks as the Mustangs had long possessions on offense.

Julianna Ouimette continued to be a force. She passed it to Quade for a layup before dishing it to Fortier for two more points. Julianna Ouimette also made a jumper as she set the tone for the Thunderbirds.

Fortier scored four straight points as the Thunderbirds got off to a scorching start from the field. They led 15-9 as they looked for a fast start.

Then, the Thunderbirds started to turn the ball over. The score was stuck at 15-9 for a number of minutes. The Mustangs were also extending possessions with multiple offensive rebounds.

“We beat a very good and talented team, and we did not play our best game. That was not our best game, but we fought hard. We did have some trouble getting some of those offensive rebounds, and we did have a couple turnovers here and there,” coach Ouimette said. “That was a smart team. (Menomonie) coach (Storm Harmon) took advantage of anything that he could.”

A triple from Berg was part of a 7-0 run that gave the Mustangs the lead.

Kristina Ouimette (11 points) ended the Thunderbirds’ drought from the field with a shot from beyond the arc, her first of the afternoon. Back came Menomonie with a 3-pointer by Sophia Schoenberger.

Berg made another 3-point jumper to give the Mustangs their largest lead of the game at four points. Once again, Kristina Ouimette had a huge answer with a triple of her own.

Anna Wheeler (17 points) made it five straight possessions with a bucket for the Mustangs. They had found their offensive rhythm. Julianna Ouimette scored two in transition before the half ended.

The Mustangs held a small 26-25 lead at the break in front of a packed crowd in Medford.

Julianna Ouimette came out strong for the Thunderbirds, putting the team on her back with 20 second half points. She scored a layup with the foul, missing her free throw.

After that missed free throw, she would make her final eight attempts as the Thunderbirds needed every point



BRETT LABORE/LAKELAND TIMES

The Thunderbirds storm the court after the referees end the game in a WIAA Division 2 sectional final game against Menomonie Saturday, March 4 at Raider Hall in Medford.

they could get.

“Our whole team’s mentality was do-or-die. I cannot take credit for the amount of points,” Julianna Ouimette said. “I was able to score because Kristina and Lily have been knocking down shots left and right so they have to get out on them. Saylor had a phenomenal game last game. They could not let her get the ball easy inside. So I was wide open, they had to cover everybody else. So they left me with a bunch of easy buckets.”

Julianna Ouimette had six of the first 10 second half points. Menomonie quickly called timeout as the Thunderbirds opened the half on an 8-2 run.

It was a game of mini-runs. Sammy Jacobsen had a big second half with 12 points. She had four straight points before Wheeler grabbed an offensive rebound for two points. It was a 6-0 Mustang run.

The Thunderbirds made 3-pointers at key moments. Julianna Ouimette answered the 6-0 run with a triple.

Turnovers plagued the Thunderbirds again in the second half. They were making shots, but also giving the ball away. Lakeland led 38-36 with 12 minutes to go with state on the line.

Schoenberger hit one of her three triples in the game to give the Mustangs the lead again. Who else but Julianna Ouimette to respond with a triple, the offensive rebound and assist courtesy of Fortier.

Lakeland went on another little 10-5 run that gave them their biggest lead of the game. Julianna Ouimette made four straight free throws before she scored a bucket in transition.

The Thunderbirds led by seven points with less than 10 minutes to go.

It looked like the Thunderbirds were going to be up by nine points. However, a missed layup by Kristina Ouimette proved to be costly. The Mustangs went on a 9-0 run to take the lead again as both teams traded off runs.

Jacobsen had four points, two coming off a turnover, and Berg (12 points) a triple to tie it at 48-48. Wheeler had a bucket to give them the lead.

One of the biggest answers of the night came from Timmerman. Held scoreless in the first half, Timmerman made a tough shot in the paint to tie it

up at 50 apiece. Evenhouse followed up Timmerman’s basket with one of her own, her first points of the night to give Lakeland the lead.

Schoenberger had another triple in her to give the Mustangs the lead again. The cheers kept getting louder as the intensity grew with less than four minutes to go in the game.

Free throws proved to come up big down the stretch as the Thunderbirds refused to be eliminated. Timmerman made a pair of free throws before Julianna Ouimette made two more in the double bonus on what looked to be an and-one opportunity. Every point mattered late in the game.

With less than a minute to go, Menomonie called timeout with Lakeland up 58-57. A Julianna Ouimette turnover led to a Jacobsen basket and a Mustangs lead.

Like she’s done throughout her entire career, Julianna Ouimette went right to the basket to try and give Lakeland their lead back with under 15 seconds left in the game. She missed, but Timmerman grabbed an enormous offensive rebound, getting fouled in the double bonus.

Timmerman looked to tie or give the Thunderbirds the lead. She missed both free throws. Evenhouse gave the Thunderbirds life when she grabbed the rebound off the miss. Jacobsen fouled her to send Evenhouse to the line. That was Jacobsen’s fifth foul, leaving the game with 16 points.

“I was just looking to rip it and ... try to find Kristina or Julianna or someone open and no turnovers. And luckily it was a foul, and I was able to shoot,” Evenhouse said.

With the everything on the line and Menomonie’s crowd cheering as loud as they could, Evenhouse focused on her free throws.

“I can hear (the fans), and it’s wonderful. The support is amazing,” she said. “On the line I was able to block it out, but during the game it fueled me.”

Evenhouse showed how clutch she could be. With a trip to state hanging in the balance, the freshman calmly made both of her free throws to give the Thunderbirds a one-point lead.

“First of all, we were down one, so I was like ‘make this first one and we’re tied up,’

she said. “And then I made that one so I’m like ‘the second one — then we can be in the lead so we got it, we got it Ava.’ (Throughout this process) I’m praying cause ... God can only take my anxiety away.”

“Ava is just a tremendous kid, a wonderful kid. I have described her as a kid that when you’re around her, (it’s impossible) to be sad or mad about anything cause she’s always happy or positive,” coach Ouimette said. “When Saylor missed that free throw and for Ava to grab an offensive rebound off a free throw was incredible. And to knock those free throws down was even more incredible. She knocked down the two most important free throws of her career.”

The Mustangs called a timeout with just 9.7 seconds left in the game. The Thunderbirds needed one more stop to send themselves to state.

“(Coach Ouimette) said ‘they might try and go high-low or they might kick it out to a 3-pointer. We don’t know what they’re going to do so we have to guard everything. Let’s go.’ So that was basically what we did,” Julianna Ouimette said. “Just try to guard everything. They got a shot off, we got the rebound and we won the game.”

The ball ended up in the hands of Berg. She created enough space to give herself a chance to win the game with a jumper. She missed the shot. However, Timmerman and Wheeler fought for the rebound as the buzzer sounded. A whistle was blown by one of the referees as they discussed the final seconds of the game.

After a brief meeting, the referees deemed the game was over. The Thunderbirds were sectional champions as they stormed the court with joy.

“I was relieved and so happy for this group of girls. To have the honor of coaching them since in the fourth grade — I couldn’t be happier for them. I told them (when they were) really little ‘if you guys stick together, I see something special in this group,’” coach Ouimette said. “(I said to myself) ‘oh my goodness, this actually happened.’ And the girls made it happen.”

Lakeland came into Saturday’s sectional final on a 10-game win streak, which included a perfect 8-0 in Feb-

ruary/March. They won those games by an average margin of victory of 44.6 points. This was their first close game since they lost to Wausau West back on Jan. 23. On Saturday, they came through when they needed to the most, winning by just a point.

“It was a very close, very tight game, and they never gave up. It just seemed to me we would steal the ball and (it would be) tipped in the hands of the other team,” coach Ouimette said. “We kept fighting, we kept battling, sprint as fast as we can, trying to do all of these things. We never quit and that just shows just how tough and how this team was going to persevere through anything, not ready to give up on those state dreams.”

State bound

The Thunderbirds (22-6, 12-0) ended up as the four-seed in the WIAA Division 2 State Girls Basketball Tournament. They’ll take on top-seeded Pewaukee (27-1, Woodland - West Conference) in a state semifinal game on Friday, March 10.

The Pirates were the second highest ranked team in Division 2 according to the Week 13 WISSports.net girls’ basketball coaches poll. They are led by Giselle Janowski (15.2 points per game) and Amy Terrian (14.2 points per game), and haven’t lost since Nov. 22 to Kettle Moraine — who advanced to state in Division 1.

“(Pewaukee) is an incredible team. A lot of these players on that team, that sophomore class and senior class — we have played those kids at the state tournament for the youth leagues,” coach Ouimette said. “It’s great to know some of their faces, and this week we’re spending tons of (time on) film and try to get as prepared as we can to go after them.”

The other WIAA Division 2 state semifinal game will be #2 Notre Dame (27-1) vs. #3 McFarland (26-2). Notre Dame was ranked first in those WISSports.net rankings while McFarland was ranked sixth. The Thunderbirds were not ranked when that poll came out Feb. 21.

The Thunderbirds and Pirates tip-off at 1:35 p.m. at the Resch Center in Green Bay.

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