

Williamsville South runs out of gas in A-1 finals

by PATRICK J. NAGY
Reporter

Williamsville South was on the brink of winning its first Section VI boys basketball title in 16 years but too much full-court pressure defense from McKinley late wore down the Billies as South fell 70-55 in the A-1 finals on Saturday at Buffalo State Sports Arena.

South led most of the game and was up 53-50 with 4½ minutes remaining when McKinley went on a 14-0 run that the Billies could never recover from. The Macks, who won a section title for the first time in 26 years, faced Maryvale for the overall Class A championship on Tuesday at Buffalo State. The winner plays Section V's Aquinas at 12:30 p.m. Sunday at Rochester's Blue Cross Arena in the Far West Regionals.

"They just kept pressing and pressing then were beating us inside," said South coach Al Monaco. "They finally wore us down."

The Billies, who hadn't played in a section final since losing to Bennett in overtime in 1996, saw a 47-38 lead with 55 seconds left in the third quarter dwindle to a 47-47 tie by the end of the quarter. McKinley's Tamere Shannon scored six of the Macks' eight points in the run on offensive rebounds. Shannon finished the quarter with 10 points, 18 overall.

"I could just see we were wearing down and getting tired," said Monaco. "He (McKinley coach James Daye) runs in eight to nine players and we were not contesting shots or battling for rebounds like we were the whole game. That was, I thought, the real turning point of the game."

McKinley's pressure in the fourth quarter led to South turnovers and a big performance from Mansa Habeeb, who scored 10 of his game-high 19 points in the final stanza.

South, who was a heavy under-



Williamsville South's Frankie Pieri tries to find an open teammate during the Billies' 58-54 Section VI Class A-1 semifinal win over Kenmore East last Wednesday at Buffalo State Sports Arena. Also pictured is Kenmore East's Gary Jones.

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dog, played well, leading 21-18 after the first quarter with balanced scoring coming from Adri-

an Wood (seven points), Mark Coppola (six), and Scott Steimer (six points, first points of play-offs). Monaco said his team was so efficient on offense that McKinley was forced to change defenses from man to zone early in the second quarter. Ahead 33-29, McKinley ran off four straight points to tie the game at 33-33 at halftime.

"Nobody expected us to even compete," said Monaco.

Wood, who was double-teamed all game, finished with 15 points and eight rebounds. Frankie Pieri added 13 points and six rebounds. Coppola, a 5-foot-1 freshman point guard, had 10 points, eight assists and only committed three turnovers and had the crowd on their feet several times from his outstanding play.

Pat Pidgeon came off the bench and scored eight second half points, including two three-pointers, his second trey giving South a 47-39 lead.

Steimer added seven points.

To face McKinley, South, behind an outstanding performance from Wood, defeated third-seed Kenmore East, 58-54, in the A-1 semifinals last Wednesday at Buffalo State Sports Arena.

Wood finished with a game-high 34 points and single-handedly kept his team ahead from the middle of the first quarter on. Wood opened the game with a jump shot and scored eight of his team's first 10 points. He finished with 19 in the first half as South went into intermission ahead, 26-25.

"I can't even describe it," said Wood. "I just did what my brother and father told me all the time — shoot the ball."

"I told him after we beat Hutch-Tech (in the quarterfinals) that that was his all-around best

game," said Monaco. "This was his best game period. He carried us. We don't even come close to winning this game without him."

Wood also hit four three-pointers, grabbed six rebounds, had an assist, and held Kenmore East's Darryl King to 14 points.

"For us to win, we had to keep King to 15 points or under," said Monaco.

Wood's best play of the game did come on the scoreboard. With 1:06 remaining and his team ahead, 52-47, Wood, on a missed free throw from P.J. Coppola, forced a jump ball in South's favor battling for a rebound with two Bulldog defenders. Fifteen seconds later, Mark Coppola calmly sank the first two of five of eight free throw attempts over the next 40 seconds. He finished with seven points.

"He's an absolutely special player," said Monaco. "Believe it or not, he's such a competitor that that's who I would want at the line in the end."

Mark Coppola also finished with nine assists, many going to Pieri (nine of 11 points in second half) in transition in the second half. Coppola only turned the ball over twice.

Pieri also had eight rebounds, three steals and three assists.

Spencer McIntyre didn't score but grabbed eight rebounds and forced a steal.

Kenmore East had chances to come back but missed a ton of easy inside looks. East coach Jay Robbins said his team missed 10 layups in the first half. Their poor shooting continued in the second half with about four missed layups, including one from Anthony Johnson at the buzzer.

"I give them all of the credit," said Robbins. "They outplayed us and played better defense than us. We make some layups and it's a different story. The perfect capsule was missing an uncontested layup right at the end."

South finishes 13-10 after starting the season 0-4.

"It takes a really special group of kids to stay together after starting 0-4," said Monaco. "Their character really came through. This team is one of those teams that came together, knew their roles and played with emotion, heart and as a team. I hope they can look back and be proud of their accomplishments."

Monaco loses nine seniors, including Wood and Pieri and only returns Mark Coppola and Brian Webb. Wood finished the season with 416 points, sixth most in a season in school history. Wood, a four-year starter, finished third at

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Amherst Central's Cordell Freeman races past McKinley players, including Kevin Chillis (0) and Tamere Shannon (23) during the Tigers' 64-60 overtime loss in

the Section VI Class A-1 semifinals last Wednesday at Buffalo State Sports Arena.

Photo by Joe Eberle
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pass that France tried to keep in play but ended with France fouling the Macks' Kevin Chillis (11 points) who left the court with an apparent knee injury. Chillis would return. Tamere Shannon (14 points) hit 1 of 2 free throws in place of Chillis with 28 seconds left. Hakeem was fouled by Shannon and hit 1 of 2 free throws five seconds later. Hakeem and Matt Krajna each finished with eight points.

Amherst finishes 16-6, its best season since winning the A-1 title two years ago. Freeman, France,

Hakeem, Krajna, Will Gowen, Troy Martin (seven points against McKinley) and Pete Caffarelli are seniors.

"I thought this season was a pleasant surprise," said Chatelle. "I don't know if anybody expected us to be here, especially in the division that we're in. Once the season started, we started to gel and play better."

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