

Miller Grove boys bound for state tourney

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By BUTCH BURNEY

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TYLER — The dance continues for Cinderella.

The unheralded Miller Grove Hornets will continue their dance on the big stage -- the UIL State Basketball Tournament next weekend -- after digging out of a 19-point second quarter deficit against Roxton Saturday morning in the Class A, Div. 2, Region 3 championship at Wagstaff Gymnasium.

The Hornets outscored Roxton 50-27 over the final 22 minutes of the title game to take an improbable and emotional 59-55 victory.

"We just weren't hitting our shots early on," said MG head coach Gary Billingsley. "We weren't being aggressive and that's not us. It was there for us -- we just had to take it."

The Hornets missed nine of their first 11 shots from the field, and when Roxton's James Black thundered home a rebound dunk with 4:28 to play in the second quarter to put the Lions ahead 28-9, Billingsley called a timeout.

"I told them that we're good enough," he said. "There is no questioning our talents or abilities. I think the key to our comeback was our intensity on the defensive end. That stopped their momentum and helped us get our rhythm."

The Hornets limited Roxton to just a pair of free throws over the final four minutes of the second quarter and finally found an offensive flow. Senior post Patrick Covington scored four of his team high 19 points in the quarter and classmate Nathan George had a bucket and two assists.

George finished with 13 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists, while Covington added 11 rebounds and junior Logan Miller contributed 11 points and six boards. Aaron Smith added 12 points.

When Miller completed a conventional 3-point play with nine seconds remaining in the half, the Hornets had cut the 19-point deficit to 30-21.

Miller Grove then forced three Roxton turnovers and four missed field goals to cut the Lions' lead to 30-27 on Covington's putback basket midway through the quarter. With junior Aaron Smith knocking down a pair of 3-pointers in the period, the Hornets trailed just 41-37 going into the final quarter.

"We were just trying to cut the lead in half every quarter," Billingsley said. "We were down by 19 and got it to nine by halftime, and then cut it to four points after three quarters."

After getting to within one point on several occasions, Miller Grove finally tied the score at 45-45 on a low post bucket from Covington off an assist from George with 4:43 to play. Their first lead came 1:20 later on a Covington putback.

The final two minutes were harrowing as Roxton guard Kalyl McGuire scored on three straight possessions to give the Lions a 50-49 advantage with just 90 seconds remaining. But Smith splashed in a corner three to give MG a 52-50 lead with 1:08 to play.

Roxton's McGuire, who had a game high 21 points, hit a driving layup to retire the game, but Covington responded with a putback basket in a crowd and drew a foul -- which he converted --

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to give the Hornets the lead for good.

When McGuire missed on Roxton's next possession, MG's Tyler Miller ran down the very important rebound, and after being fouled, made two pressure free throws to increase the Hornet lead to 57-52.

McGuire though buried a 3-pointer with 11 seconds left to trim the lead to 57-55.

Coming out of the ensuring timeout, Billingsley had George streak downcourt and Smith threw a length-of-the-court inbound pass for a layup and the clinching score.

"These guys have worked hard all year and they were tremendous today," a tearful Billingsley said. "It shows a lot of character not to give up when you're down by so much so early. I'm so proud of them."

Miller Grove's Miller finished with four points and three rebounds. Roxton's Black had 12 points but only two came after halftime.