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Colts hand 'Cats first league loss

By Tom Purfield

It's fairly rare when both teams walk off the floor feeling good about themselves.

Particularly when you're talking about fierce prep rivals South and Central high schools.

In a tense game worthy of its Top-10 billing, South felt good about finally being tested, answering the call and walking away with a win. Central was pleased with its effort and performance, knowing it gave the Colts all they wanted.

But in the end the Colts, ranked No. 2 in Class 4A, controlled the fourth quarter for a 64-56 South-Central League win over No. 8 Central on Friday before a huge, excited crowd at the Colorado State Fair Events Center.

"It was real good. We showed a lot of composure this game and we just had to overcome," South senior DaQuan Cartwright said. "We had to get it together because we knew we had to win this game. We just started boxing out and getting back to the fundamentals."

Central went toe-to-toe with the powerful Colts for nearly three quarters before a key 9-2 South run near the end of the third created some breathing room. South hit its last five shots of the game and went 11-of-13 from the free-throw line in addition to dominating the glass during the final 8 minutes to put the game away.

Both teams entered Friday undefeated in S-CL play and Central had only one more loss than South overall. But the Colts have blown out everyone since Christmas break, winning their five league games by an average of 40.2 points per game. South is now 6-0 in league and 13-2 overall, while Central dropped to 5-1 and 11-4.

The Cats looked that seemingly invincible beast straight in the eye and then some.

"That's a quality team. I give Central a lot of credit," South coach Dave Lockett said. "They're good athletes and have kids who can jump, some weapons, kids who can shoot the ball and they have (Devon) Manning, who can create and make kids better."

"I thought our it was composure, taking care of the ball and our free throws; things we just finally had to chip away at a little bit."

For Central, it was a night when the 'Cats discovered they can play with one of the best teams in the state. For a team that had little varsity experience coming into the season, the electric environment was pretty exciting, too.

"I think our kids grew up a little bit today. They haven't seen this type of crowd and the atmosphere and it's a benefit for us," Central coach Brad Ranson said. "They kids did a great job and they executed the game plan."

It was an excellent battle between Manning and South junior Kameron Wilhite, probably the two best players in the S-CL. Manning finished with 27 points and Wilhite had 22 to lead their respective teams.

The two are quite familiar with one another, having played more than 50 games together last summer on their club team.

"It's fun. We go back and forth and he's a great player," Wilhite said. "We needed that challenge. We have to have close games like that to prepare for the future."

Central did all of the things it needed to in the first half to play with South. The 'Cats grabbed four more rebounds, which created 10 more shots, and only turned the ball over three times during the opening half. But the Colts shot a higher percentage (45 to 30) from the floor to take a 28-27 halftime lead.

Two Manning free throws tied the game 33-all with 3:56 remaining in the third quarter before South broke free. Wilhite and Tim Zufall hit back-to-back buckets before Wilhite stole a pass by Central's Josh Borjon and went the distance for a layup. After Borjon missed a short jumper, Zufall converted a three-point play to make it 42-35.

"It was the turning point of the game. Every possession is so important," Ranson said. "You can't be lax against a good team like that and they took advantage there."

A few different factors worked against Central in the final quarter. Tyshawn Nicholas, the Wildcats' best rebounder, fouled out early in the fourth and South won the battle of the boards 9-3 in the quarter. As Central struggled through 5-for-15 shooting (8-for-26 for the second half), Manning didn't attempt a shot in the fourth until 1:03 remained. By then, it was too late for the league's leading scorer to pull off a miracle.

Also, South's superb depth was certainly in the Colts' favor late in the game. Cartwright, Tyrel Williams and Josh Dome all scored in double-figures while shooting a combined 9-of-13 from the floor.

But Wilhite may have been the game's most crucial figure. In addition to putting the ball in the hole, he had three rebounds, a pair of assists and defended Manning into a 9-for-24 shooting night. Ranson said Wilhite was the player "who really hurt us."

"We try to talk all the time when we get a break. Him and I communicate really well," Lockett said. "He does some great things. Obviously, his leadership and athleticism were key tonight."

South 64, Central 56

South-D.Cartwright 3 4-4 10, Wilhite 7 6-7 22, Clark 1 0-1 2, Williams 3 3-4 10, Dome 3 6-7 12, Lockett 0 1-2 1, Zufall 3 1-2 7. Totals: 20 21-27 64. 3-point goals: Wilhite 2, Williams. Fouls: 17.

Central-Nicholas 1 0-0 2, Smith 1 4-6 6, Borjon 1 2-2 5, Romero 4 0-0 11, Manning 9 6-9 27, Ross 0 1-2 1, Baca 1 2-2 4. Totals: 17 15-21 56. 3-point goals: Borjon, Romero 3, Manning 3. Fouls: 22. Fouled out: Nicholas, Baca.