

Swede girls 'wilt under pressure'

Written by Deb Egenberger
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Coach says Cardinal defense was too much to handle in district final

SIDNEY—All season long, every practice and every game, the Swede girls have worked on breaking a variety of full-court presses.

It's become a given that opponents would hassle Gothenburg ball handlers at every opportunity.

"We've worked and worked and worked on that," said Gothenburg basketball coach Chris Lecher.

The girls have improved over the course of the season, not showing nearly as much frustration lately against a trap defense.

That's why Lecher thought his Swedes would better handle the pressure from Chadron in the C1-6 district final at Sidney on Friday.

"I sure thought we would play them better than we did," the coach said. "We didn't handle their press very well at all."

The Cardinals blew past Gothenburg 76-49 to advance to this week's state basketball tournament in Lincoln and end the Swedes' season with a 15-11 record.

It was difficult last week, Lecher said, to simulate Chadron's length and height, let alone the Cardinals' relentless defense.

"At one point, they had three 6-footers on the floor," the coach said. "And these aren't big, slow

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girls. They are all very athletic.”

The Swedes got off to a good start, taking a 7-2 lead to open the quarter.

“I was feeling pretty good about things at first,” Lecher said. “Then we wilted under pressure.”

High hopes quickly turned to desperation as Chadron fired up the defensive heat with each possession.

“It was constant in-your-face pressure,” Lecher said. “We started to panic and threw the ball away time after time.”

Chadron capitalized on the turnovers, bursting out to a 23-12 lead at the end of the first quarter.

The Cardinals didn't let up a bit in the second quarter, continuing to cruise to a 39-23 advantage at halftime.

“Outside of the possessions we gave them that turned into layups, we didn't do too bad,” Lecher said. “Half-court versus half-court, we did fine finding open shots.”

The girls handled Chadron's 2-3 zone when they had the chance. Unfortunately, though, there weren't enough possessions that made it to the half-court set.

Chadron kept the hammer down in the second half, never allowing the Swedes to chip away at the Cardinal lead.

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With the win, Chadron (22-2) earned the No. 1 seed in Class C-1 and advances to play Lincoln Christian (17-9) in the first round of the state tournament at 7 p.m. Pershing Auditorium in Lincoln Thursday.

"None of us played the way we, coaches and players, expected," Lecher said.

At the same time, Lecher said Chadron coach Curt Holmquist told him that was likely the Cardinals' best game, both offensively and defensively.

As if that wasn't enough, Lecher said he thinks other circumstances played against Gothenburg.

A snow day on Thursday took the team out of its routine, leaving the girls without a pre-game practice.

And placing the Cardinal feisty student cheering section behind Gothenburg's bench made it a little difficult to concentrate at times.

"I'm not making excuses," Lecher said. "That's stuff you have to learn to play around. But I do think it affected us."

The three seniors on the team led the Swedes in scoring during their final high school basketball games.

Brittyn Munster was high scorer with 12 points, including a pair of three-pointers. Jacey Wiggins added 11 points and Taylor Wolf chipped in 10.

"We had a great year," Lecher said. "We won the Southwest Conference tournament and made it to the district final with 15 wins. We reached a lot of our goals, just not the last one."

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Despite losing the senior core of his team, Lecher is looking forward to what the Swedes will bring back to the court next season.

"A lot of our toughest opponents were senior-heavy teams," he said. "We will bring back plenty of experience and we should expect even better things next year."