By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

The eruption from the Lady Saints bench and from the green seats at the end of Saturday night's thrilling come-from-behind 49-46 victory over Butler told just how important this game was for Seward.

Seward needed a clutch three-pointer from Ricquia Jones in the final minute and a free throw from Madison McLain with 20.3 seconds to play to squeeze out a three-point lead.

Marta Oledzka then blocked a shot in the lane on Butler's last-ditch effort, and the fans rose to their feet as the exhausted Lady Saints charged the court to celebrate the hard-fought win.

"Ricquia makes big baskets when we need it," Seward coach Toby Wynn said. "I got on her in second half because she had a shot and didn't take it. I told her earlier in the week, 'We have to have more scoring out of you. You are capable.' She had an opportunity, and she hit it. We do a shooting drill at practice, and she shoots there every day."

Seward had to battle back after falling behind by 11 in the first half.

The Lady Saints struggled to make shots in the first 12 minutes and also turned the ball over 14 times in the first half. In that time, Seward only scored four points.

Butler was able to jump out to a 15-4 lead before a basket from McLain and a three-pointer from Bridget Crandall cut the lead to six.

Butler had chances to extend a lead at the free throw line after building the lead back to 10, but the Lady Grizzlies missed all four shots in the final six minutes of the half.

Seward scored two more three-pointers before half to trail 23-19.

The Lady Saints took their first lead with 17:12 to play when McLain drained a three, but with 8:27 to play, Butler's Chelsea Holliston put the Lady Grizzlies back on top, 35-32.

Seward regained the lead with another Jones three-pointer with 5:57 to play, 39-37, and built it to a five-point lead with 3:10 to play.

Butler cut the lead to two, but Jones clutch three in the final minute sealed the win.

"It was a gritty effort by our kids," Wynn said. "To hang in the way we did and battle back in the second half, to finish a game is good for our kids. It's something we can carry on. Defensively, we were very good tonight. I am very proud of our kids."

Prior to the game, Wynn said that Butler would be a tough challenge. The Lady Grizzlies had pushed No. 1 Hutchinson and No. 12 Garden City earlier in the season.

“Thier kids played hard,” Wynn said. “They are trying to win a championship, (Butler coach Mike) Helmer has them defending and playing hard. Our kids were so excited, maybe over-amped up at times. They put a little more on the shot. It had a championship-level feel to it. When that happens you have to execute in the half court. I wasn’t paranoid we didn’t score too much early because they didn’t score many either.”

Seward (14-6, 5-2) will travel to Hutchinson Wednesday to face the No. 1 Lady Blue Dragons (21-0, 7-0)

“We don’t want to get too high after this one,” Wynn said. “We know what Hutch is about. Everybody knows their record and how good they are. At the same time, we know they are beatable. We have seen them on film and in person. There’s always excitement about playing the No. 1 team.”

The Lady Blue Dragons have not lost at home in more than 60 games.

The last team to do it — Seward in 2009.