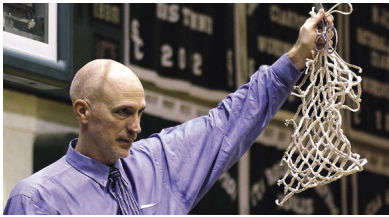


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<http://www.hpleader.com/images/stories/2013/February/zollinger-net.jpg>



By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

The biggest game ever played in the Green House lived up to its billing Wednesday and ended with fans rushing the court to join in the celebration of the Saints third consecutive Jayhawk West championship that required late heroics to pull off a 62-60 win over No. 5 Hutchinson.

Seward coach Bryan Zollinger received hugs from his players and from fans, and the nets at the Green House were cut down in a rare moment when the last game of the regular season turned out to be a battle between the top two teams in the conference.

Seward had to rally from eight down in the second half to earn the win, and a frenzied Saints crowd rose to its feet for the last five minutes of the game until the final buzzer and might have set a record for volume in the acoustic-friendly gym had there been a decibel meter.

The first heroic effort came from Kaheem Ransom who nailed a three-pointer with 4:24 to play to give the Saints a 53-52 lead.

The Blue Dragons regained the lead two minutes later, and then it was Edson Avila's turn to hit a clutch shot to put the Saints back on top by one with 1:51 to play.

Seward's defensive pressure forced a turnover, and an outlet pass found Jabari Peters who was fouled as he threw up a wild shot that went in. Peters made the free throw, and the Saints had a 60-56 lead with 28 seconds to play.

Hutchinson's Alex Davis hit a long-range two with 18.5 seconds to cut the lead to two, and then an inbound play was mishandled by Ransom, and AJ Spencer made a bucket with 11 seconds to play to tie the game.

Seward inbounded the ball to Malcolm Hill-Bey who drove the length of the floor into the lane and attracted three Blue Dragon defenders. That left Leslee Smith wide open outside the lane, and Hill-Bey dished the ball to Smith who went up and laid the ball in off the glass to give the Saints a 62-60 lead with 4.5 seconds to go.

With no time outs, Hutchinson inbounded the ball, crossed half court and heaved up a long-range three that sailed wide right, and the celebration started.

"It is a testament to our guys," Zollinger said. "Out of all the teams I've had here, these guys have had to overcome more adversity, a tougher schedule, more games in a short period of time — we had to play four games in eight days, twice— and then we had two back-to-back games to win it."

Seward also had little help from the free throw line.

The Saints never reached the bonus since Hutchinson only committed six fouls in the second

half and two in the first. Seward only made two of six from the line. Hutchinson, however, made 10 of 14 attempts at the line.

“Not getting any bonus chances in either half of the championship game, they hung tough,” Zollinger said. “They have overcome every challenge I threw at them. I am proud of where they started to where they finished.”

Seward trailed by five at halftime on a late three-pointer, the largest lead of the game for either team. While the game was still in the balance, Zollinger did not believe the Saints were playing up to their potential

“We weren’t getting back on defense, weren’t rebounding, we were standing around on offense,” Zollinger said. “We told them, ‘It’s a championship game, let’s make plays. If we are going to go down, let’s go down making plays, not standing around.’”

Kaheem Ransom did not have his biggest game of the season, but his presence and ability to move the ball to the right person continued to provide dividends.

“Look at the conference stats,” Zollinger said. “If (Ransom) hasn’t been the most consistent in the conference, I don’t know who has. There have been times he has flat carried us. To not even be recruited out of high school — an unheralded guy like him just through sheer work ethic, come to work every day — he’s a hard-hat guy. He will be a thousand point scorer, Top 10 all time at a school that has a pretty good basketball tradition. That’s a Cinderella story right there.”

With music blaring and fans not in any hurry to leave the Green House, the Saints started to pose for pictures, and the ladder came out to cut down the net for the first time to celebrate a Jayhawk West championship.

“This is really sweet,” Zollinger said. “It is right up there among the best. We set out with that challenge. I don’t know the last time someone won the conference three times in a row. I circled this game clear back in August, and I said, ‘That is what it is going to come down to right there.’”

Zollinger climbed the ladder to clip the last thread, he hoisted the net high in the air while his team gathered below as flashes captured the moment. Two games down with eight to play, Seward had run the table to win their third straight conference title.

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