

By Phil Sandoval

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LAVERNE - Blake Kennedy wasn't the first option to shoot the ball.

But, with 7.2 seconds left in a tied playoff game with Laverne, the Hooker High senior had enough presence of mind to seize the opportunity.

Good thing he did.

Kennedy's running 3-pointer from back of the left arc swished gently through the cords as the buzzer echoed to give the Bulldogs a un-thought of 56-53 win to keep the Bulldogs in the Class A Regional basketball tournament.

Hooker continues tournament play this afternoon in Seiling against Pond Creek.

"I wasn't thinking. I just saw I was open and took the shot," Kennedy said of the game-winning basket. "I don't know how to explain it."

Or needed.

The senior's field goal was the culmination of a gritty effort by the Bulldogs, who led briefly twice, back in the first quarter and trailed by 11 points early in the final six minutes of play.

Hooker coach Brad Coffman said the team's early problems came from a lack of putting the game plan into action.

"We didn't execute. That was our biggest thing. Defensively, we didn't rotate help. Early on, we just forgot to do what we're suppose to do."

Playoff inexperience confounded Hooker as well.

"This is our first time in the Regional playoffs," Coffman said. "I think the pressure got to them. They've never been here before.

With just under five minutes left, the Bulldogs rose above those problem to set up Kennedy's last-second dramatics.

Earlier, Coffman begged Alex Sanchez to shoot the ball. The sophomore responded to the coach's wishes when he fired in a 3-pointer for a 45-all tie as the last bucket of a Hooker 12-5 run.

Laverne regained the lead on the next possession, then put distance between themselves and the now-confident Bulldogs by scoring the next 7 points to go up 52-45.

Hooker responded by matching the Tigers run to re-knot the game at 53-53 with 50 seconds left.

Kennedy sank one of 3, 3-pointers he had in the game as part of the run. Along with contributions from Michael Wiebe and Payson Slater, whose free throw on a Laverne shooting foul after a basket, forced the tie.

Getting the ball back, Laverne failed to score.

Although Hooker gained ball possession. With 18.3 seconds remaining, Coffman sensing that something was not right with the Bulldogs, called his last time out.

“I felt like we were starting to panic. We were running our clock offense and we had a guy wide open. But, I told them, I wanted the last shot.”

Coffman said game's final play, “Wasn't exactly the look that we wanted. But Blake stepped up and hit a big one. Blake's been shooting the ball really well the last three or four ball games. We've been on him and he stepped up.”