

By ROY ALLEN

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So it's probably not exactly how they wanted to do it, but despite a last second 69-68 loss to Cloud County Saturday night at Bryant Gymnasium in Concordia, the Seward County Saints still managed to make Jayhawk Conference history by becoming the only four-time consecutive outright Jayhawk West Champions in league history.

After the long road trip to Concordia, the Saints got off to a good start against the Thunderbirds as Malcolm Hill-Bey scored Seward's first five points of the game to put them in front 5-2 early on.



Just six minutes into the game, both of the Saints top penetrators, leading scorer Niem Stevenson as well as Hill-Bey, found themselves on the bench with two fouls. That's when the Saints dogfight started. Seward had to battle from there on out, getting a bucket from Verdell Mays, his first of the conference season, to give them an 11-10 lead with 12:30 left in the half.

The game went back and forth, with neither team able to gain any ground and it was 17-16 Cloud before Secean Johnson scored with 6:25 to go in the half to make it 18-17 Seward.

The game was tied at 20 with 4:00 to go and later on Johnson scored again for Seward to put the guys in green back in front 26-24. Cloud had a one point lead as time ran down in the first half until Tyreke Sharp launched a 40 footer at the buzzer and found the bottom of the net for a three to give the Saints the momentum and a 33-31 lead at the half.

Both teams struggled to score in the first half with Seward shooting 32 percent and Cloud County 37 percent.

Johnson was the lone Saints player able to get anything going in the first 20 minutes, leading Seward with 13 points while the next highest scorer on the Saints stat sheet was Bridgeforth and Hill-Bey with five each.

The T-Birds opened the second half on fire, outscoring Seward 9-0 in the first three minutes of the period to quickly take their biggest lead of the game at 40-33.

A three from Evan Allen in the corner broke Cloud's momentum and got Seward back to within four, and after a free throw, the Saints had it down to a one possession game at the 15:00 mark.

Frank Johnston's first basket since January 3rd got Seward to within one on a second chance opportunity and Hill-Bey scored on the Saints next trip down the floor to cap an 8-0 run to put them in front 44-43 with 14:00 to go. After the second half media timeout, both teams began to pick it up a little bit and each hit a three and then scored on a drive to give Cloud a 54-52 lead with 8:37 left.

The T-Birds went up six at the 7:00 mark but the Saints kept on plugging away, drawing to within three on a pair of Hill-Bey free throws and drawing to within one as the Saints leading scorer Stevenson got his first points of the night 34 minutes into the game.

Johnson tied the game at 60 later on with a pair of free throws and the teams traded points to 62-62 with 4:00 to go.

Hill-Bey drove and scored to put the Saints up 64-62, but four straight Cloud points put the T-Birds back in front 66-64 with 2:52 remaining.

A three point play by Bridgeforth put the Saints up 67-66 and Cloud tied the game up at 68 with 1:30 to go. Both teams had unsuccessful chances to take leads as the clock ticked past 1:00 and it was still 68-68 as Cloud called a timeout with 50.7 seconds left.

The Saints got their biggest stop of the game and checked out on the boards to give themselves a chance for the last shot of the game with the shot clock off. However, Seward got a little bit antsy and drove to the basket with six seconds left and weren't able to score and Cloud quickly pushed the ball back the other way with a chance to win.

That's when the Saints committed a cardinal sin, fouling a jump shooter with time expiring on the clock. After some discussion from the referees, they decided to put 1.8 seconds on the clock as Cloud went to the line. The T-Birds made the first and missed the second as the Saints called a quick timeout down 69-68 with 1.4 seconds left. Seward wasn't able to get a shot off to attempt to win it as Cloud stole the inbounds to run the clock out and take home the win 69-68.

It wasn't a pretty stat sheet for either side as Seward shot 38 percent in the game to Cloud's 37 percent. The difference came at the free throw line where the Saints were outscored 26-21, shooting just 56 percent from the line on the night. Johnson led Seward with 17 points while Hill-Bey scored 14 in limited action.

Despite the loss, the Saints got help from around the conference Saturday night to earn them their fourth straight outright Jayhawk West Conference Championship. It is the first time in Jayhawk Conference history that a West team has won four straight conference titles.

The Saints fell to 20-9 on the year and 10-3 in Jayhawk West action. Cloud improved to 15-14 overall and 7-6 in league play with their second straight big home win.

Seward will return to the court in their final regular season home game on Wednesday when they host the Pratt Beavers on sophomore night in the Greenhouse. Seward's four sophomores will be recognized before the game with tip off between the Saints and Beavers taking place at approximately 8:05 p.m. Free tickets are available courtesy of buyout sponsor Sharp, McQueen, PA, at their Liberal location or at Community Bank, Pizza Hut, or Hutch's.

Saints stumble to outright title

Monday, 24 February 2014 13:54

The Saints will host the first round of the Region VI Tournament in the Greenhouse next Saturday, playing host to the loser of Wednesday's Labette/Cowley matchup on the East side.