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By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

One by one the Saints climbed the ladder after Wednesday's hard-fought 72-69 win over Pratt to snip a strand of net along with a piece of history.

Seward became the first team ever in the Jayhawk Conference to win the title four years in a row, and for the second straight year the Saints ended the regular season on top of a ladder with scissors in hand in the Greenhouse to celebrate the accomplishment.

Pratt didn't make the celebration easy. The Beavers pushed the Saints to the very end, never letting the Saints build a lead bigger than five points in the second half. Pratt had the lead with

11:09 to play, but Niem Stevenson tied the game at 56 with 9:27 to play and scored eight of his game-high 30 points the rest of the way along with two big threes from Evan Allen to hold off the pesky Beavers.

Pratt proved they can be a force in the Region VI tournament, not only with their 8-5 conference record, but with their ability to knock down outside shots and having a size advantage in the lane.

The Beavers made nine of 18 three pointers, and that prevented the Saints from being able to pull away.

Pratt didn't help their cause at the free throw line in the second half, only making four of nine attempts, and the Saints were able to make a five-point lead in the final two minutes stick for the win.

Stevenson dominated with 30 points, Malcolm Hill-Bey had 10, and Allen had 10.

"It's starting to sink in that we finally got it done," Seward coach Bryan Zollinger said. "This year has been full of challenges — injuries, discipline. Early on at 4-6 people were jumping off the ship. To these 10 guys that stuck, they overcame every obstacle, and that makes this one pretty special.

Zollinger never waivered in his demand for excellence, but his players have come to expect it.

"I promise them it won't be easy but it will be worth it," he said. "They will grow as a person and a player. Criticism is like fertilizer, it looks like poop, it tastes like poop, but at the end of the day, if you use it right it can help you grow."

