

By George Watson

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LUBBOCK, Texas – Shayla Bennett scored a game-high 28 points, and No. 2 Gulf Coast State dominated No. 7 Seward County in the paint en route to a 79-65 victory in the quarterfinals of the NJCAA Division I Women’s National Basketball Tournament Thursday at the Rip Griffin Center.

Jhileiha Dunlap was a force on the inside for the Lady Commodores (28-2), scoring 25 points and pulling down 12 rebounds as the two-time defending champions advance to the semifinals to face No. 1 seed Shelton State College at 5 p.m. on Friday.

“(Assistant coach Grover Hicks) talked to me and he kept telling me that without me, we aren’t going to win, without me being on the court we’re not going to be able to win,” said Dunlap, who is headed to North Carolina next season. “So I just got it into my mind that I had to get the rebounds and post up, and when I still get the ball up top I had to work just as hard to get the ball in the arc and just score.”

Maybe even more impressive was the defensive gameplan and execution put forth by the Lady Commodores, who used their length and athleticism to close out on Seward’s 3-point shooters.

The Lady Saints (31-4) led the nation this season in 3-pointers made and attempted, but on

Thursday hit on just 9 of 31 from beyond the arc while their top shooter, Mollie Mounsey, was just 1-for-7 from 3-point range.

“We had some good looks there in the first half,” Seward head coach Toby Wynn said. “Even in the first part of the third quarter we had some wide-open looks from three and if those had gone and we’d have gotten some momentum going that way it would have helped. They did a really good job of pressuring us and making us have to work for everything. They’re just long and athletic and sometimes very tough to get a shot off against.”

Gulf Coast actually beat Seward at its own game as Bennett drained four 3-pointers as part of her night, and the Lady Commodores sank 10 of 24 from long range. That also helped open things up inside for Dunlap, who scored 16 of her points in the final quarter. Gulf Coast also outrebounded Seward by a wide margin, 49-33, including a 16-9 edge on the offensive boards.

“That’s kinda been this team all year. We’ve had some crazy stuff happen to us with injuries, and we just find a way somehow, someday,” Gulf Coast head coach Roonie Scovel said. “They’re very resilient and have had to grind out every single game this year. Seward is such a great 3-point shooting team, but I thought we did a pretty good job of eliminating the threes, from (Mounsey) especially.”

Trailing 29-28 at halftime, Gulf Coast took control to start the third quarter, scoring eight straight points thanks to a pair of 3-pointers by Bennett and Diene Diane. That gave the Lady Commodores a 36-29 lead, and they never trailed again.

Two huge 3-pointers on consecutive trips up the floor by Bennett pushed the lead to double digits at 52-39 with 1:54 to play in the third quarter, and Dunlap took over from there to close the game out.

Silvia Veloso led Seward with 15 points and Mounsey finished with 11. Janesha Green sank a trio of 3-pointers as part of here 11 points for Gulf Coast.

Gulf Coast did a good job from the beginning taking away Seward’s ability to hit from outside.

The Lady Saints hit just 4 of 14 shots from beyond the arc, and Mounsey struggled to an 0-for-4 mark.

But the Lady Saints found other ways to get the ball in the basket, outscoring the Lady Commodores 14-4 on points in the paint and getting 10 points off nine Gulf Coast turnovers.

Despite the advantages, Seward could not pull away as Gulf Coast also hit four 3-pointers and outrebounded Seward 25-18. Leading 20-19, the Lady Commodores got a pair of buckets from Shayla Bennett, who finished the first half with a team-high nine points, to go up 25-19 with 6:32 to play in the second quarter.

Seward, however, ended the half with a 10-4 run, getting a short jumper from Vilma Covane with just over a minute remaining and holding Gulf Coast scoreless over the final 3:18 of the half.

Silvia Veloso led Seward with 10 points in the first half.