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Falcons fly past Jeeps on Senior Night, 55-44

SPORTS

By Ben Spicer - PDT Sports Contributor



South Webster's Kelton Kelley goes airborne.

Emily Sites | Daily Times



South Webster's Shiloah Blevins drives to the rack.

Emily Sites | Daily Times

This time of year is one to remember for every high school team.

Regardless of records or where a school is at, there's always a night where seniors who contributed to the program are honored.

Friday night at Minford, senior cheerleaders and basketball players were honored before the Falcons game against South Webster.

In a night that was chalk full of moments to reflect upon, Minford was able to down the Jeeps in front of their home crowd by a score of 55-44.

Seniors Breyden Tilley, Elijah Craft, and Logan Boston were honored before the game and were inserted into the starting lineup during the contest by Falcons head coach Josh Shoemaker.

Each of three have played a vital part in the advancement of the Minford program, albeit in different roles.

"It's been great," Boston said. "I've played with a lot of really good players to come out of Minford the past four years, and I've been really close with a lot of them, especially the seniors this year and the seniors who graduated this past year."

"I'm here to help out where I can, enjoy it, and make it better for everybody else."

Though the celebration was welcome, the seniors are focused in on what's to come as their final season heads to tournament time.

"It comes quick, but it's good to go out on a win," Tilley said. "That's all I'm thankful for right now, and tournament time is coming up so we've got to lock in."

While it was senior night, there's still plenty of basketball left to potentially be played. The Falcons aren't ignoring that fact, and felt that their performance could be a sign of a tournament run at this rate.

"Tonight showed how good we can play," Craft said. "If we play like that every game, it's going to be really good for us."

Minford didn't play the whole four quarters as great as they might have hoped, and were struggling early.

Despite being down four players due to illness, South Webster fought hard for the entire duration of the game. Playing without Samuel Holstein, Andrew Smith, Levi Murphy, and Josiah Edwards, the Jeeps faced plenty of adversity.

"They knew going into it that we had a tough task at hand, being down three or four guys," South Webster head coach Brenton Cole said.

Still, Cole's group looked good early.

With Shiloah Blevins back in his second game from injury, the Jeeps had a big scoring threat back on the floor. Couple that with the emergence of players like sophomore Brayden Bockway and junior Jacob Ruth, and South Webster was left with plenty of weapons regardless of the lower numbers.

Unfortunately for the Jeeps, the aforementioned group of players would score 38 of their 44 points as South Webster was able to find much scoring beyond them in the contest.

After the first quarter, the Jeeps had jumped out to a 15-11 advantage.

South Webster was able to create a four-point cushion with 2.3 seconds remaining in the period, as Ruth drove to the rim and made a basket while getting fouled.

"Jacob is good about getting into the paint," Cole said. "He's good about getting to the paint, and he's also good about hitting his free throws. He's really done a lot for us, he's like the motor that doesn't quit."

The Falcons got six points from junior Cameron Dalton, who would finish with 13 points overall.

"I thought Cam was really good, especially in that first half," Shoemaker said. "He took it right to the interior defense and he finished."

"That's the biggest thing with Cam, he's gotten good shots but he hasn't finished all year, and tonight he focused. He came off two feet, laid it up strong and did a good job."

Going back and forth in the second, Minford was able to make a comeback with 9-1 run in the middle of the quarter with three different players contributing.

Junior Kelton Kelley closed out the run with a steal and a three-point play for the Falcons to give them a 20-18 lead with 1:38 to play.

Kelley had a game-high 21 points to lead the way for Minford.

On the run, the Falcons mixed defenses and also implemented a rigorous full court press that was tough to cross half court on for the Jeeps.

Changing the looks really seemed to benefit Kelley, as he had seven in the quarter.

"He bought in to the press," Shoemaker said on Kelley. "He got a quick and one off a steal, and also got another rotation where he got a layup and got a deny on the wing. He did a good job looking for other ways [to score] than just open jump shots."

Although they only scored eight points in the quarter, South Webster led 23-22 at halftime.

Minford was set to make some adjustments, though, as Shoemaker saw some areas his team could attack.

"Coach Shoe wasn't very happy," Tilley said. "He ripped into us, told us to get up and press and that helped us a lot. We started off slow, we didn't have any energy, but the press really helped us."

Shoemaker wanted his players to play with more passion on the floor, and the press seemed liked a good idea.

"We talked about it in the locker room," Craft said. "He just told us to come out with more intensity, and just get after the ball."

With the quickness of Craft, Tilley, and players like Darius Jordan, buying in to the press is easy.

"I love trapping and trying to play one-on-one defense," Craft said. "I just like to use my speed."

While the Falcons struggled in the first half, the press brought new life in the final two quarters to the defense and the offense.

"The first quarter and a half, we were just bad," Shoemaker said. "Offensively, we just didn't get any good shots and didn't get to the rim. We weren't aggressive enough, so we just said we're going to press the rest of the game and see what happens."

"They worked hard all night. They rotated well, they sprinted to every trap, and we rotated when they got tired ... that takes a lot of work, it's not as easy as it looks."

With a shorter bench due to players being out and the Jeeps still recovering from some injuries, South Webster was handcuffed by the press.

"The press that they threw on us there, my guards didn't handle it very well," Cole said. "Shiloah Blevins coming back, this is the first press he's seen. I didn't want to put him in that situation in practice coming back from an injury."

"We know moving on that's something we've definitely got to do, work on breaking the press."

Minford forced 11 second half turnovers, including six in the third quarter.

Defense in the second half also struggled for the Jeeps, as they were limited at times to only defending the half court.

"I know I've used this phrase before, but we just ran out of gas there in the third heading into the fourth," Cole said. "Individual guarding and help side defense was a big letdown."

South Webster got behind the eight ball a bit with the pressure, but a factor for them in the second half was Bockway.

Bockway would score eight points in the second half, and 13 overall.

"Boy, he's really shot the ball well," Cole said on Bockway. "He's even looked to drive more, he's getting defensive rebounds for us, he's playing defense, and he's doing a lot of things for us right now."

"It sure is nice now that we're getting Shiloah back to have two guys that are 6-foot-4 or above out there working together."

After three quarters, the Falcons were ahead 39-33.

Minford carried an 11-1 run into the fourth, ignited by threes from Kelley and Elijah Vogelsong-Lewis.

Only a freshman, Vogelsong-Lewis has emerged as a key role player for the Falcons.

"He really got so much better in the last month, and I think it was really just confidence," Shoemaker said. "Early in the season, he was just trying to feel his way out and was playing with guys he's never played with before. Now, he understands his role, he knows what to do, he knows his abilities, and he's been huge."

In the final quarter, Minford pulled away with seven points from Breyden Tilley.

Tilley hit a three-pointer just 14 seconds into the fourth, demonstrating a lot of confidence in himself.

“It feels good,” Tilley said. “On senior night, in the fourth quarter, just hitting shots and doing good.”

The Falcons outscored the Jeeps 16-11 in the fourth, holding on to win 55-44.

Next up for both teams is their sectional tournament games, as Minford will take on Ironton and South Webster will play Federal Hocking.

“It’s going to be a tough game,” Craft said on the competition against the Tigers. “All tournament games are usually tough, but I’m feeling confident about this game.”

Ironton will face off against the Falcons at 8 pm on Monday night in Jackson.

The Jeeps will play Federal Hocking at Meigs at 6:15 pm on Wednesday in their sectional challenge.

“It’s a new season, but it’s a new season for everybody,” Cole said. “They’re a very capable team, and we have to bring our A-game that’s for sure or it could be a short-lived tournament run.”