

Minford disposes of past trials

SPORTS

Defeats Albany Alexander, 50-42

By Kevin Colley - kcolley@aimmediamidwest.com



Minford's Erin Daniels gathers for a jump shot.

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Minford's Erin Daniels shoots a mid-range jumper over Albany Alexander's Kristen Taylor on Thursday evening in Waverly.

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Minford's Hannah Tolle looks for an open teammate.

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Minford's Caitlyn Puckett brings the ball up the floor.

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WAVERLY — When a team doesn't play at its best, and still accomplishes its goal of eliminating a unit that had knocked it out of postseason competition in each of the last two years, one can say that the stakes have been raised inside the Minford Falcons' girls basketball program.

And true to form, Minford showed exactly how much those stakes were raised — with their best player, once again, proving to be right at the center of it all.

Trailing by two points entering the fourth quarter of action and facing a third straight defeat to the Albany Alexander Spartans' girls basketball program, Erin Daniels simply entered a different area code than the rest of her competition. The senior's 30-point outing, along with a huge halftime buzzer-beating three-pointer by Caitlyn Puckett and intense hustle plays from the duo, along with freshman Livi Shonkwiler, allowed the Lady Falcons to overcome a 33-31 third-quarter deficit and take home a 50-42 victory over the Lady Spartans in a thrilling atmosphere at the Downtown Arena in Waverly on Thursday evening.

However, Scott Caudill knows that Minford — even at 23-1 — still needs to play a better brand of basketball in order to reach the goals that have been set within the program. And if there are people who are upset about that outlook by the fourth-year head coach, they simply haven't seen what the Lady Falcons are capable of doing.

“We got Alexander’s best, and we didn’t play our best,” Caudill said. “We’re lucky to get out of Waverly with a win. Hat’s off to Alexander. Our girls will be the first to tell you that we weren’t focused, disciplined, or mentally prepared for this game. The noise got to us. Where we switched defenses a lot, we were confused in some spots. Once we got a couple of kids in foul trouble and we got kids out of rotation, we just looked confused, and it showed.”

And during the first quarter of action, much of that confusion was due in large part to the play of McKena Rice. The 5-7 junior did nothing but give Minford complete fits as the positionless talent made scoring the rock look effortless throughout the contest. Her eight-point output was followed by six points from Daniels as the two — who waged a fearless battle all game — deadlocked the score after a quarter of play.

“(McKena) Rice was incredible tonight,” Caudill said. “We knew going in that Alexander will do a lot of high ball screens for Richardson with Rice, or vice versa, so we knew that we had to get up on those screens in order to limit the open space, and we weren’t doing it.”

As Rice continued to go off — ultimately notching four triples en route to an amazing 16 first-half points — Minford looked to be in a bit of trouble. On quite a few possessions, the Lady Falcons, instead of working Alexander’s zone in order to open up driving lanes, settled for three-point field goals and contested jump shots, which allowed the Lady Spartans to retake the lead three different times in the second quarter of action.

“For as experienced as we are, we rushed too many shots,” Caudill said. “We didn’t set up our plays. We’d come down and take the first open shot. What happens with that is they were all still in position in their zone, so we were never able to get any offensive rebounds, which is one of our key components. So we weren’t getting any second-chance points because we weren’t making Alexander rotate out of their designated area in the zone. We just came down and jacked up the first shot that we got.”

However, Minford found solace in two of its hardest-working upperclassman talents.

With the Lady Falcons needing a spark due to Rice’s continued scoring onslaught, Daniels proceeded to match the junior stride-for-stride as the senior do-it-all talent scored seven big points to give Minford an 18-15 advantage.

When Alexander, behind a three-pointer from Rice and a layup from Rachel Richardson, went on a 5-0 run to take a 20-18 advantage, Puckett proceeded to come up large.

After a Richardson layup was blocked by Blankenship, Puckett gathered up the rebound with just over four seconds left, sprinted down the middle of the floor, and moved off to the left side, where the junior forward threw up a three from over 30 feet out. The shot, like it was made for a TV commercial for a “One Shining Moment” special, shot completely off of the glass and through the hoop as the half expired to send the Minford crowd into a frenzy as the Lady Falcons took a 21-20 halftime lead on the ninth and final lead change of the opening pair of stanzas.

“The big shot from Caitlyn changed the momentum going into the locker room,” Caudill said. “I went from wanting to kick, scream, and go crazy at halftime to saying, ‘Alright, now the momentum’s on our side.’ Caitlyn really saved her teammates from a butt-ripping with that buzzer-beater.”

In the third quarter, Daniels and Puckett took control early as the pair's hustle won out in the opening minutes. Daniels found freshly-inserted Zoe Doll for an open three, and the senior guard, along with Puckett, added baskets inside after fighting off well-contested defense from Rice and Kristen Taylor, among others, to claim a 28-24 Minford lead within the first four minutes of the quarter.

"Caitlyn was all over the place for us tonight with her rebounding and defense," Caudill said. "She was all over the place for us. Erin was too. She was huge for us. She was absolutely huge with her steals on attempted transition opportunities by Alexander that stymied their momentum. Caitlyn stepped up and did awesome for us, and Erin did what she was expected to do. Her shot wasn't falling, so she took the ball to the hole and made plays defensively for us."

But over the latter half of the frame, that four-point cushion went as quickly as it came as Rice — with the help of Richardson — led Albany Alexander on a sizeable 9-3 run. During that spurt, Rice and Richardson hit back-to-back treys, with the former adding yet another three-pointer — her sixth of the contest — with less than a minute to go to cap off the spurt.

When the Lady Panthers held for the last shot, however, Minford's Livi Shonkwiler came up with a big steal with three seconds left and looked to have the game-tying basket in hand as the freshman's layup at the buzzer went in. Unfortunately for the Lady Falcons, Shonkwiler's release on the layup was just a mere few-tenths of a second too late, and Alexander ultimately retained a 33-31 lead after the third quarter.

However, the freshman's steal, which was still much more than vital considering the circumstances of the contest and how hard points were to come by over the first three quarters of action, seemingly lit a fire under Minford's entire roster. That fire wouldn't go away for the rest of the contest.

After Ashley Blankenship scored on a low-post basket to tie the score, Daniels made the first of two free throws to give the Lady Falcons a 34-33 advantage. When the senior missed the second attempt, Puckett tipped the ball to Blankenship, who missed two low-post shot attempts but stayed with the ball as the junior followed up a miss with a bucket inside during a critical five-point swing.

"The fourth quarter was the most disciplined that we've been all year," Caudill said. "In the first half, we looked like our team from two years ago. In the second half, I felt like we really competed. That comes down to leadership. The girls did a good job of slowing the offense down and doing the right things. Our girls know better. They know that if they slow down and do the right things, good things will happen."

Much of the initiation of that spurt, however, was created by Shonkwiler, who played beyond her years on the defensive end of the floor as her on-ball pressure would indicate.

"Livi stepped in and had a really good game for us," Caudill said. "We told the girls, 'Be ready because you don't know when your number is going to be called.' We went nine or 10 deep, and by the time the fourth quarter came around, I was just looking for a kid who was ready to come out and have a big night for us. She stepped in during the second half and did exactly that. She had so many deflections in the fourth quarter. I'm so proud of that girl right now. She stepped up in a district semifinal and made a huge difference for us."

Daniels, however, was right in the middle of it too.

When Alexander tried to stop the run by taking advantage of fastbreak numbers, the Ashland University signee would come out of nowhere to deflect passes out of bounds or steal them as if she had played under her father, Brent, as a ball-hawking safety on the football field. The senior added six huge points to cap off the game-deciding 11-2 spurt that put Minford in front by a 42-35 tally, then kept the Falcons on the point for good by going 4-of-6 from the free throw line while holding Rice to just two points in the fourth quarter to seal the deal. Daniels ultimately finished with an amazing 30-point outing.

“That’s what you expect out of big time players like Erin,” Caudill said of Daniels’ two-way play. “She stepped up big time for us in the second half. We knew that we had to get the ball in her hands, but honestly, as big as her 30 points were, her defense was even bigger. She stepped it up big for us at both ends of the floor, and that’s who Erin is. She could have five points for you and hurt you, or she can have 30 points and hurt you. She’s just a good passer, shooter, and defender who does everything right and does whatever needs to be done in order to get the win.”

With the victory, Minford will put its 23-1 record, and the trials and tribulations that the Falcons have gone through to get to this point, on the line when the Lady Falcons face off against Chillicothe Southeastern, who staved off a furious comeback by Sardinia Eastern Brown to win the nightcapping affair, 50-47. The Division III, Waverly I District Final will commence on Saturday, Feb. 3 at 12 p.m. inside the Downtown Arena in Waverly.

“We can’t play the way that we did (on Thursday evening),” Caudill said. That’s the bottomline. It’s tournament time. You’ve got to celebrate the win and advance. Everybody’s going to bring their best against you now, and you’ve got to be prepared to bring your best every night or it’s going to be a long bus ride home. I’m confident in the girls, and I’d much rather be a Minford Falcon. We’ve got a nine-day break, so hopefully, we can get everybody healthy and ready to go.”