

That's the best way to describe Tuesday night's match up between the Watauga High boy's basketball team and St. Stephens.

The Indians, led by Watauga County native Murphy Post, edged WHS 60-59 in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference opener for both teams at Lentz-Eggers Gym. James McGill nailed the eventual game-winning free throw with 2.6 seconds left to win it for the Indians (5-2; 1-0 NW3A/4A), who have beaten the Pioneers (6-2; 0-1) seven consecutive times.

McGill collided with Cameron Baker on his baseline drive. Baker fouled out on that play.

Matt Lambert, who poured in a career-high 19 points in the loss, nearly won it for the Pioneers. But his layup attempt at the horn rolled off the rim.

"I know Matt is beating himself up after missing that shot," said WHS coach Rob Sanders. "But he's the guy that allowed us to stay in contention. He put us in that position to win the game. He literally carried us in the first half."

WHS hasn't beaten Saint since 2010-11. Post, who became head coach of the Indians in 2011-12, is now 5-0 against his alma mater.

"We were just lucky tonight," Post said. "Give a lot credit to Watauga. They really came after us in the second half. They got the momentum right off, and we were playing on our heels. I don't know that we played good defense on that last possession, but we got a deflection, and luckily for us, it didn't go in."

Marcus Conner, who led the Indians with 15 points, deflected WHS' inbounds pass out of bounds following McGill's go ahead free throw. The Pioneers maintained possession in the front court with 1.4 seconds left. Robbie Jenkins deflected T.J. Poulos' inbounds pass to Lambert underneath the bucket.

But Lambert grabbed the loose ball in the scramble and got his shot off before the buzzer, but his game-winning attempt came up short.

"We really didn't play well tonight," Sanders said. "But we had a chance to win the game in the last two minutes. That speaks pretty highly of our guys. (Caron Corpening) gave us fits all night. He drove to the rim, drew our defenders inside, and he found the open man. We didn't do a very good job of rotating on defense."

The Indians pulled away from a 20-20 first-quarter tie to lead 31-24 with an 11-2 run early in the second quarter. The lead eventually grew to 11 points with less than a minute to play in the first

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half. The Indians outscored WHS 17-8 in the second period.

But Trevor Eggers found his shooting touch in the third quarter and got WHS within one at 42-41 as he scored four consecutive points. Eggers, who finished with 12 points, scored ten of those in the WHS' third-quarter rally.

But Christian Beasley, who came off the bench and scored ten points, including eight in the second half, scored four points in a six point run to close out the third quarter that gave the Indians a 48-41 advantage.

Trailing 48-44 to start the fourth quarter, it became a nip-and-tuck affair from that point on. And these two teams, who played an eight-overtime game last January, battled their way through five ties and five lead changes down the stretch. Utah Jones gave WHS a 57-55 lead with 1:08 left, but Corpening tied it up moments later.

A pair of free throws by Chris Hefner of the Indians made it 59-57 with 36.4 seconds to go. But Jay Harrill, who struggled with his shooting touch on this night, buried an elbow jumper with 22 seconds left to tie the game at 59.

That set the stage for Tuesday's dramatic finish.

"We have to change our focus," Sanders said. "We can't come into games like this and play lax like we did tonight. We need to be ready from the opening tip. I felt we didn't do that tonight. It was a tough call on that foul (that sent McGill to the free throw line). It was a huge call and it's real frustrating. But in basketball, your going to have times when calls don't go your way, or the officials swallow their whistles."

Lambert, who scored 12 of the game-high 19 points in the first half, also had five rebounds. Jones finished with eight points. Baker, who fouled out with 2.6 seconds left, finished with a season-low two points and six rebounds. Poulos had four points, seven rebounds and seven assists. Eli Gailes, who was in foul trouble for most of the second half, had three points and six assists.

Corpening had 13 for the Indians, Jordan McGinnis and Alex IJames each had seven points apiece.

The Pioneers take on Wilkes Central tonight at Lentz-Eggers Gym. Coverage begins at 6:05 p.m. on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net. The Eagles (3-3), who haven't played since last Tuesday, have lost two in a row. And they haven't won in Boone since 1999.

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NOTES: The WHS junior varsity boys defeated St. Stephens, 52-39. Caleb Bryson led the way with 16 points; Nick Sherman had 11 points and Jeremy Ringler had eight points.....St. Stephens defeated WHS 40-30 in the JV girls game. Alina Kosmala led WHS with 11 points. Allison Quinn had eight points, Olivia Williamson had six points.

ST. STEPHENS 60, WATAUGA 59

SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 TOTAL

ST. STEPHENS 20 17 11 12 - 60

WATAUGA 20 8 16 15 - 59

STS: CORPENING 13, HEFNER 4, McGINNIS 7, McGILL 4, IJAMES 7, BEASLEY 10, CONNER 15. FG: 21, 3FG: 2, FT: 12-17.

WHS: LAMBERT 19 (5 REBOUNDS), EGGERS 12, HARRILL 7, GAILES 3 (6 ASSISTS), POULOS 4 (7 REBOUNDS, 7 ASSISTS), DOBBINS 4, JONES 8, BAKER 2 (6 REBOUNDS). FG: 18, 3FG: 5, FT: 8-12.

WHS GIRLS CRACK WIN COLUMN

It took a while, but the Watauga High girl's basketball team finally picked up its first win of the year.

The Pioneers knocked off St. Stephens 37-36 at Lentz-Eggers Gym in the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference opener for both teams. Ryan Loflin put WHS in the winner's circle as she hit a running one-hander in the lane with 5.3 seconds left to play.

That shot gave WHS its ninth consecutive win against the Indians. They haven't beaten WHS since the 2009-10 season. In turn, St. Stephens has lost 30 straight NW3A/4A conference games dating back to 2010-11. Tuesday's loss also snapped the Indians three-game winning streak.

"I'm so happy for Ryan," said WHS coach Klay Anderson. "She was really down on herself when she missed those free throws against Avery (in a loss on December 3 at LE Gym). I am so proud of my girls. We lost the lead, but they battled back and pulled it out. It was a total team win."

WHS (1-7 overall; 1-0 Northwestern 3A/4A Conference) built a 29-22 lead in the third quarter. But the Indians (3-4; 0-1) battled back and eventually took a one-point lead on a conventional three-point play by Autumn Williams with 3:54 left to play.

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Kaelin McNeill, who had one of her better performances of the season inside, hit a layup and put WHS back on top, 35-34. But the Indians jumped back on top thanks to Virginia McMahon's pull up, baseline jumper with 37 seconds left. And that set the stage for Loflin's game-winning shot.

"We were very fortunate (St. Stephens) missed some big free throws at crunch time," Anderson said. "They make those free throws, and we're in big trouble. I'm impressed with St. Stephens. They're really improved. Coach (Betsy) Reynolds really has them playing with a lot of confidence. They remind me a lot of Alexander Central girls three years ago before they exploded on their successful run."

Trailing 35-34, Sy-Tasia Brown of the Indians missed two free throws with 1:55 to play; leading 36-35, Kylea Cooper missed two free throws with 17.4 left to play. The Indians were 3-12 at the foul line.

"It's one win and it's a huge win," Anderson said. "I don't care if it was 37-36 or 100 to nothing. All that matters is that it's a conference win and we're tied for first place. How good is that, especially for us. And we got Savanna (Wood) back. She didn't score a lot, but she provided a calming demeanor out there down the stretch, and it was outstanding."

Wood, who missed the last three games with a badly sprained left ankle, played a majority of the game and scored eight points. Her three ball in the third quarter gave WHS it's seven-point lead.

"The bottom line tonight is that we made our shots when it counted the most and they didn't," Anderson said. "It wasn't pretty, but man, it sure feels good."

Loflin led WHS with a game-high ten points. Wood and McNeill had eight points apiece. McMahon led the Indians with eight points. Williams finished with seven.

"It doesn't get any easier," Anderson said. "We've got Wilkes Central coming in her (tonight), so we've got to put this one behind us. Scott Waugh is a great coach, and he always has his girls ready to play. We've got to build off this game. It's been a tough start, but it's a long season."

The Eagles have won four straight against the Pioneers. Coverage begins tonight at 6:05 on Classic Hits 100.7 FM and GoBlueridge.net.

WATAUGA 37, ST. STEPHENS 36

SCORE BY PERIODS 1 2 3 4 TOTAL

ST. STEPHENS 10 6 11 9 - 36

WATAUGA 9 6 14 8 - 37

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STS: KILLIAN 6, WILLIAMS 7, COOPER 4, BUMGARNER 1, HICKS 4, McMAHON 8, BROWN 6, FG: 12, 3FG: 3, FT: 3-12.

WHS: WOOD 8, DERRICK 4, HARRIS 7, LOFLIN 10, McNEILL 8. FG: 13, 3FG: 2, FT: 5-8.

Photo Courtesy: Ryan Loflin, Bill Sheffield