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Panthers pull away to win Niclai

Neil Tarpey/The Times-Standard

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ARCATA--For almost three quarters the outcome was still in doubt.

But then one long shot and a 10-3 run provided the McKinleyville Panthers with breathing room to hold off a talented South Fork Lady Cubs squad, 63-53, for the Dick Niclai championship before a packed, loud house at Humboldt State's East Gym.

With the Panthers holding a slim 45-44 lead with a minute to go in the third quarter, Chelsea Roane hit a 3-pointer from the top of the key to give Mack a four-point, 48-44, advantage heading into the fourth quarter.

"Chelsea's shot was huge," agreed Panthers head coach Brad Warze.

Roane finished with 14 points.

At the start of the fourth quarter, with Panthers Courtney Cuffee and Stacey Sundberg playing solid defense and hitting both boards, and teammate Sage Romberg continuing to score in the paint, McKinleyville started to assert itself.

If you had not seen Romberg play before, you were in for a treat.

The fantastic freshman scored a game-high 26 points -- most of her shots hitting nothing but net -- and continually snared rebounds in traffic.

With two minutes left in the first quarter Romberg literally rose to the occasion, blocking a shot when she was the lone defender

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on a two-on-one Cubs fast break, and following with a block of South Fork's very next shot.

"I surely can't say enough about Romberg -- her desire to succeed," said Warze. "She came out of the locker room calm and subdued, very focused."

Both teams looked

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ready from the opening tip, and exhibited the confidence to shoot from the perimeter or down low.

South Fork's Janay Wilkinson had a hot hand in the first quarter, as she nailed a pair of 3-pointers and a jumper for eight points.

Teammate Casey Murphy scored nine of her game total of 10 points in the

opening half.

In the first quarter, Murphy scored an old-fashioned 3-pointer by scoring down low amidst three Panther defenders and making the free throw after she was fouled, and then, in the second quarter, made a nice hesitation dribble layup.

A shot in the second quarter epitomized the back-and-forth nature of the title game's first half.

With the Cubs leading 18-17, Mack's Allissa Williamson tossed up a short shot in the paint that rolled slowly along the front rim for what seemed like minutes before dropping in a for basket and a Panther 19-18 lead.

Not surprisingly, after two well-played quarters, McKinleyville held a slim 33-31 lead.

After intermission, the Panthers tried to surge ahead via a pair of 3-pointers by Roane, but the Cubs were equally determined.

Wilkinson hit two high arcing jumpers and a 3-pointer from so far out that sports broadcaster Tag Wotherspoon, sitting two seats to my left, announced that it was "from downtown." His radio announcing partner Mel Berti, seated directly to my left kidded Wotherspoon, saying, "Downtown? You mean downtown Arcata."

Wilkinson finished the game with 17 points, and worked well in tandem with senior teammate Rochelle Connolly.

Connolly, the Cubs' center, led her team with 20 points and battled hard for rebounds, evidenced by her final basket in the last moments of the game when she grabbed an offensive rebound and scored a putback.

"They both played outstanding games," said South Fork head coach Robert Wilkinson. "They know each other pretty well."

Two factors seemed to turn the momentum in McKinleyville's favor in the second half.

The first was Mack's halftime adjustment to play more zone, which seemed an effective strategy.

The second was fatigue in some of the South Fork players towards the end of this excellent ballgame, evidenced by their missing some easy baskets..

"We didn't have the energy," said Wilkinson. "We missed too many short ones."

To Coach Warze and the McKinleyville PANTHERS, I offer my congratulations on a job well done, yet another Big 5 title, your seventh consecutive trip to the Niclai title game, and I wish you well on your journey into the NCS playoffs.

To the McKinleyville readers and fans, I have intentionally capitalized "Panthers" to acknowledge my inadvertent blunder in the Thursday edition of pairing -- twice -- another school's mascot with your team.

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I am thankful to the all the Mack faithful who brought this to my attention, and thankful to all the others --including Athletic Director Dustin Dutra --who could have told me, but did not.

To Coach Wilkinson and the South Fork Cubs, I offer my congratulations on a job well done, a FIFTH consecutive Little 5 title, another trip to the Niclai title game, and I wish you well on your journey into the NCS playoffs.

And to show that I am either an equal opportunity offender, or a guy starting to experience some senior moments, I offer my apologies to the South Fork readers and fans for unintentionally stating in the Thursday edition that it was only your third consecutive Little 5 title.

And thanks to Coach Wilkinson for being so gracious when, earlier this season, I referred to his first name as "Brad".

Finally, to the fans of both these great high schools, I say thanks for continuing to read my first season of prep basketball stories.

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