

By JOHN HENSON

Harlan County Sports.com

After two lackluster performances to open the season, Harlan County coach Mike Jones cautioned his Black Bears that they'd "lose by 20" if they weren't ready to play in Saturday's district opener against visiting Middlesboro.

The Bears took the warning to heart, exploding for 13 straight points in the first quarter to wipe out an early 12-4 deficit on the way to an 81-57 win that improved Harlan County's record to 3-0 and brightened Jones' outlook about his team's future.

"That was our gameplan at the start, but got to standing and shooting too much early in the game," Jones said. "We got their mind back on attacking. We did a better job of attacking, but we need to be able to finish shots better. We missed a bunch around the basket the first half. There are also some things we need to correct with our defense."

"I thought we were ready to play coming out, but they had a good gameplan and executed it well," Middlesboro coach Russell Thompson said. "We hit a scoring drought, and they were able to take off with it. A team that handles the ball as well as Harlan County, it's hard to come back. They also rebounded well."

Harlan County's trio of junior guards dominated the game, combining for 62 points by attacking the basket at every opportunity. Tyler Brewer hit 13 of 18 at the free throw line in a 25-point performance. Chad Massingill connected on six of 10 as he scored 24. Alex Sergent hit four of seven free throws on his way to a 13-point night.

"We played a lot better to beat this team like we did," Jones said. "I had seen them play and I was worried about how physical they were and how they ran up and down the floor. I think our kids did a good job of beating them down the floor. They will be a contender in the district tournament, so every one of these district games are important."

"Their bigs do a good job of sealing and clearing the lane out for them, so you can't give any help," Thompson said. "When they get down that deep they are able to draw the foul and get to the line. That makes it tough defensively on how you guard them. We have to keep working, and, hopefully, be a better matchup when they come to Middlesboro."

Junior forward Derek Smith scored 14 points and senior forward Cameron Rancher added 10 to lead Middlesboro (2-2).

The Jackets had success early from the outside as Michael Willson hit two 3-pointers and Donnie Foister added one to give Middlesboro an early eight-point advantage. A three-point play by Massingill turned the momentum in the Bears' favor and that's where it stayed as Sergent, James Bond and Brewer also had baskets to help Harlan County build a 19-14 lead after one quarter.

Massingill had five straight points to start the third quarter as the lead grew to double digits. Sergent, Massingill, Bond and Brewer scored as Harlan County closed the half with a 13-6 run to go up 42-24 at the half.

The second half turned physical with both teams attacking and both teams fouling. Harlan County took a 58-38 lead into the final quarter.

Brewer and Sergent kept the Bears in control in the final period, combining to hit five of six shots from the field. Brewer also connected on six of eight from the line.

"I was proud of my kids the second half," Thompson said. "We kept battling and pretty much played them even the second half."

After winning only three games last season, the Jackets appear to be one of the region's most improved teams.

"Our guys are trying to figure out how to win and they've committed themselves to our program," Thompson said. "I think we'll have a better season. Tonight we took a little step back, but it's nothing we can't recover from. We have a big district game Tuesday against Harlan."

Harlan County returns to action Wednesday at North Laurel. Middlesboro is at home Tuesday for a girls/boys district doubleheader against Harlan.

The Bears improved to 3-0 in junior varsity action with a 52-19 rout of Middlesboro (1-2).

Tyler Miller scored 14 points and Cole Wilson added 10 to lead the Bears. Zach Caldwell and Zach Wilson added eight and seven points, respectively. Cody Bumgardner and Dallas Howard each scored four. Trey Sanders and Fred Massey contributed two each. Bo Harris scored one.

Blake Davis led the Jackets with 10 points. Josh White and Cole Frazier added three each. C.J. Blackstone scored two. Joe Turner added one.

MIDDLESBORO (2-2)

Michael Wilson 2-9 2-2 8, Donnie Foister 3-11 1-2 9, Derek Smith 3-9 8-12 14, Cameron Rancher 4-11 2-4 10, Zack Riddle 4-5 0-0 8, Logan Miracle 0-3 0-0 0, Jake Taylor 1-2 0-0 2, Boone Bowling 1-2 0-0 2, Jarrel Stephney 0-3 0-0 0, Blake Davis 1-4 2-2 4, Tyler Prater 0-0 0-0 0, Austin Poindexter 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 19-55 15-22 57.

HARLAN COUNTY (3-0)

Tyler Brewer 6-12 13-18 25, Alex Sergent 4-13 4-7 13, Chad Massingill 9-16 6-10 24, Aaron Caldwell 0-0 0-0 0, Chase Calto 1-2 1-2 3, James Bond 2-8 2-2 6, Tyler Miller 1-1 0-1 2, Shamil Clark 1-3 1-2 3, Zach Caldwell 1-1 0-0 3, Trey Sanders 0-0 0-0 0, Cole Wilson 1-1 0-2 2, Cody Bumgardner 0-1 0-0 0, Fred Massey 0-1 0-0 0, Derek Akal 0-1 0-0 0, Dallas Howard 0-0 0-0 0, Zach Wilson 0-0 0-0 0, Kolby Vanover 0-0 0-0 0, John Dotson 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 26-60 27-44 81.

Middlesboro	14	10	14	19	—	57
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Harlan County	19	23	16	23	—	81
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3-point goals: Middlesboro 4-19 (Wilson 2-5, Foister 2-7, Rancher 0-1, Taylor 0-1, Bowling 0-1, Smith 0-2, Miracle 0-2), Harlan County 2-6 (Z. Caldwell 1-1, Sergent 1-5). Rebounds: Middlesboro 36 (Smith 10, Rancher 7, Wilson 4, Foister 4, Riddle 3, Taylor 2, Davis 2, Stephney 2, Bowling 2). Turnovers: Middlesboro 22, Harlan County 9. Fouled out: Middlesboro (Taylor 9).

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While the visiting Middlesboro Lady Jackets were struggling to score, Harlan

County senior point guard Miranda Davenport helped the Lady Bears build a big early lead on the way to a 60-43 win on Saturday. Davenport hit four 3-pointers in the first half and outscored the Lady Jackets by herself with 14 points as Harlan County took control with a 31-11 advantage at the break.

"She's comfortable with the ball in her hands," Harlan County coach Anthony Nolan said. "Sometimes she tries to do too much, but we have several kids who can help handle the ball."

Davenport scored 25 points to lead the Lady Bears, who improved to 5-0.

"With that zone and trying to double team the post, she was able to stretch the defense," Nolan said. "We have other kids who can do that, too."

Middlesboro (0-4) got almost all its scoring from two players as senior guard Ashley Mason scored 19 and eighth-grade forward Anajae Stephney contributed 18 points and eight rebounds.

Harlan County raced to an 8-0 lead as Davenport hit a 3-pointer Kalee Carroll scored inside and Brooklyn Massingill converted a three-point play. Middlesboro pulled within six before Davenport hit her second trey and Sarah Evans connected on two free throws to give the Lady Bears a 17-6 cushion after one quarter.

Middlesboro hit only two of 10 shots in the second quarter as Harlan County stretched its lead to 20 at the break with the help of two baskets each by Davenport and Carroll.

"Four of the games we've played now we've had quarters when we couldn't score, when we couldn't hit shots," Middlesboro coach Elgie Green said. "We have kids who can shoot. We're just having spells where we struggled. We have played two the top seven teams in the state, plus Harlan County, which is probably in the top three in the region. It doesn't get any better Tuesday against Harlan, and then we play Madison Central on Friday, a top 10 team in the state.

"We're extremely young, especially on the bench. We have to stay committed and stay focused and keep a good attitude."

Harlan County cooled off in the third quarter, missing 15 of 18 shots, but still managed to build on its lead. Davenport's fifth 3-pointer followed by two free throws from Shauntae Lewis helped the Lady Bears take a 41-19 advantage into the final period.

Mason hit three 3-pointers in the fourth quarter as Middlesboro scored 24 points, topping its total from the first three quarters combined. Stephney hit 10 of 12 at the line in a rough final period that grew increasingly aggressive.

"They got us a little out of our rhythm tonight and it got ugly, but as long as they are coachable and play hard we'll be OK," Nolan said. "It's early and it's a long season and we have so many things we need to work on. We'll keep working to get better."

Nolan said the Lady Bears didn't focus on last year's upset loss to Middlesboro in last year's 52nd District Tournament as they prepared for the rematch.

"I think they've had it in the back of their mind, but this is basically a new team,"

Nolan said. "We try to put the things in the past in the past and leave them there. All we know is what we control from here forward, but that was probably in the back of their mind, but it wasn't our focus."

Harlan County plays host to Hazard on Tuesday before heading to the Berea Holiday Classic. Middlesboro will play host to Harlan on Tuesday.

MIDDLESBORO (0-4)

Rayann Moyers 1-5 0-0 2, Kelsie Hensley 0-0 0-0 0, Ashley Mason 6-15 3-6 19, Emily Pennocchia 2-4 0-0 4, Anajae Stephney 3-12 12-16 18, Bailey Hensley 0-0 0-0 0, Taylor Prater 0-0 0-0 0, Amanda Biscardi 0-0 0-0 0, Sophie Knuckles 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 12-36 15-22 43.

HARLAN COUNTY (5-0)

Miranda Davenport 5-16 10-12 25, Brooklyn Massingill 2-6 1-3 6, Kaitlyn Stittums 2-5 0-0 4, Kalee Carroll 4-13 0-1 8, Sarah Evans 0-4 3-4 3, Lauren Lee 1-5 0-0 2, Shannon Shackelford 0-0 0-0 0, Keisha Mimes 3-4 0-0 6, Madison Cornett 0-2 0-0 0, Shauntae Lewis 1-2 2-2 4, Bella Noe 0-2 2-2 2. Totals: 18-59 18-24 60.

Middlesboro	6	5	8	24	—	43
Harlan County	17	14	10	19	—	60

3-point goals: Middlesboro 4-12 (Mason 4-10, Moyers 0-2), Harlan County 6-15 (Davenport 5-8, Massingill 1-3, Cornett 0-1, Lee 0-3). Rebounds: Middlesboro 23 (Pennocchia 8, Stephney 8, Mason 4, Moyers 1, Biscardi 1, Prater 1), Harlan County 38 (Carroll 10, Evans 10, Davenport 4, Stittums 4, Mimes 3, Lewis 3 Lee 2, Massingill 1, Cornett 1). Turnovers: Middlesboro 20, Harlan County 12. Fouled out: None.