

By JOHN HENSON
Harlan County Schools

Anthony Nolan was willing to concede the perimeter if he could own the paint in Thursday's 52nd District Tournament championship game against visiting Bell County.

When Bell hit three 3-pointers in the opening four minutes, the strategy may have looked a little shaky, but it soon paid off as Harlan County pulled away for a 52-37 win.

"We wanted the kids to trust in the gameplan. I know they hit a couple of shots early, but as long as you continue to pressure those rims tighten up a little bit," said Nolan, the Harlan County coach. "Living and dying by the 3 is tough. I wanted to be the aggressive team. I told the kids to trust in it and stick with it."

Harlan County dominated the backboards, outrebounding Bell 48-21, leading to nine more shots from the field and a whopping 20 from the line as the Lady Bears hit 16 of 23 from the line compared to only two of three for the Lady Cats.

"We had problems rebounding the basketball," Bell County coach David Teague said. "We did force them into some missed shots, but they got a lot of second-chance points and got to a lot of loose basketballs. They have a little more size than we do and we talked before the game that we had to do a good job rebounding. You have to have everybody blocking out and going after the basketball."

"We wanted to make sure we got to the rim more," Nolan said. "They tried some chasers on us and our other kids stepped up."

Senior guard Miranda Davenport scored 18 points and grabbed 10 rebounds to lead the 24-6 Lady Bears. Eighth-grade guard Brooklyn Massingill added 12 points. Junior center Sarah Evans was limited to four points but owned the glass with 18 rebounds. Senior forward Kalee Carroll had eight points and 10 rebounds.

"I can't say enough about our post players," Nolan said. "We didn't shoot particularly well inside, but we got so many more shot attempts. That's a big factor."

Bell (18-11) was led by guards Morgan Garnett and Maci Morris with 15 and 11 points, respectively. Morris had a big game against the Lady Bears in a win earlier in the year at HCHS, but she struggled from the floor on Thursday as she missed 15 of 20 shots.

"They kept us pushed way out on the perimeter," Teague said. "We settled a lot for jump shots. You have to give them credit. They did a good job defensively, and we didn't attack well in order to get to the free throw line." Led by two 3-pointers from Jessica Sanders and one from Garnett, Bell built an early five-point lead, but the Lady Cats could manage no more points the remainder of the quarter and only two the remainder of the half.

Two free throws by each by Davenport and Carroll put the Lady Bears on top, and Evans' three-point play to close the quarter stretched the lead to 16-11.

Lauren Lee and Davenport had 3-pointers in the first four minutes of the second quarter, sandwiched around a basket by Morris, to give HCHS a 22-13 lead. Massingill hit a jumper, then nailed a 3-pointer from the corner while drawing a foul. Massingill's four-point play capped a 9-0 run to close the half as the lead grew to 28-13 at the break.

Harlan County built its lead with the help of second shots as the Lady Bears owned a 25-10 advantage on the glass, led by nine from Evans and eight from Carroll.

Bell hit three of four shots to begin the third quarter, one each by Garnett, Morris and Sanders, to pull within 11. Stittums and Davenport answered for the Lady Bears to push the lead back to 16, at 36-20, with 4:57 left. The two teams combined for only seven points the remainder of the quarter as Harlan County held a 40-23 lead at the end of the period as Massingill closed the quarter with a 3-pointer.

Davenport was assessed a technical just after the quarter ended during a brief tussle for a loose ball. Garnett's free throws to open the fourth period cut the lead to 15. Bell got as close as 13 on Makayla Neal's basket with 4:20 left. Bell didn't score again until the final minute as HCHS put the game away when Davenport hit five of six at the line.

The district championship was the second in four years for the Lady Bears. After being upset by Middlesboro in last year's first round, Nolan said this year's title was especially sweet.

"We try not to look back, because this is a different group, different team," Nolan said. "Our seniors (Davenport and Carroll) gave us great leadership. They know what it is to be in the championship and not even be there. Their leadership has meant so much to the young kids. What better way to finish your last home game than to cut down the nets the first time at Harlan County High School. This is a special group and class."

Davenport led the all-tournament team as the most valuable player. Other Lady Bears selected included Carroll, Evans, Kaitlyn Stittums and Massingill. Morris, Garnett, Sanders and Robbins were selected from Bell. Ashley Mullins and Kelly Cox were named from Harlan. Ashley Mason and Anajae Stephney made the team from Middlesboro. Harlan County won the cheerleading competition, with Bell County placing second.

BELL COUNTY (18-11)

Jessica Sanders 3-12 0-0 8, Morgan Garnett 5-9 2-2 15, Makayla Neal 1-5 0-0 3, Maci Morris 5-20 0-0 11, Paige Robbins 0-1 0-0 0, Taylor Wilson 0-1

0-1 0, Jamie Boatright 0-0 0-0 0, Kelli Smith 0-0 0-0 0, Morgan Robbins 0-1 0-0 0. Totals: 14-49 2-3 37.

HARLAN COUNTY (24-6)

Miranda Davenport 4-17 8-10 18, Brooklyn Massingill 4-9 1-1 12, Kaitlyn Stittums 2-7 3-6 7 Kalee Carroll 3-11 2-3 8, Sarah Evans 1-5 2-3 4, Lauren Lee 1-4 0-0 3, Keisha Mimes 0-0 0-0 0, Shauntae Lewis 0-0 0-0 0, Shannon Shackelford 0-2 0-0 0, Bella Noe 0-1 0-0 0, Madison Cornett 0-2 0-0 0. Totals: 15-58 16-23 52.

| | | | | | | |
|---------------|----|----|----|----|---|----|
| Bell County | 11 | 2 | 10 | 14 | — | 37 |
| Harlan County | 16 | 12 | 12 | 12 | — | 52 |

3-point goals: Bell County 7-27 (Garnett 3-5, Sanders 2-9, Neal 1-3, Morris 1-9, Wilson 0-1), Harlan County 6-15 (Massingill 3-6, Davenport 2-7, Lee 1-2). Rebounds: Bell County 21 (Morris 7, Robbins 4, Sanders 2, Wilson 2, Neal 1, Smith 1). Turnovers: Bell County 8, Harlan County 12. Fouled out: None. Technical fouls: Harlan County (Davenport).

By JOHN HENSON

Harlan County Schools

Trying to contain Ashley Mullins is not a novel idea for Harlan's opponents over the past three seasons.

Executing the plan as well as the Harlan County Lady Bears did on Tuesday in the first round of the 52nd District Tournament is rare.

Mullins, Harlan's star senior forward, was limited to only four shots from the field and 10 points as Harlan County overcame its own offensive problems to win 45-35 and earn a matchup against Bell County on Thursday in the district finals.

"She's a great player. She is so much of their offense and defense and makes them click," Harlan County coach Anthony Nolan said. "We wanted to make them start standing around, and sure enough in the fourth quarter I thought they were standing and looking. We broke this into four battles — each quarter. I thought they might try to start forcing it into her late, and the clock works in your favor when you have that lead. They spent three or four minutes looking to get her the ball."

Harlan shot only 33 percent (11 of 33) from the field and took only 11 shots from inside the 3-point line, scoring 24 of its 35 points on 3-pointers.

"You can live and die with it (3-pointers)," Harlan coach Derrick Akal said.

"I also thought they got every loose ball. They won the 50-50 game.

Miranda (Davenport) missed two free throws in the fourth quarter, which she rarely does, and they ran the ball down. Those loose balls killed us."

Davenport, a senior guard, scored 19 to lead the 23-6 Lady Bears. Senior forward Kalee Carroll added 12 points and eighth-grade guard Brooklyn Massingill tossed in 10.

Junior guard Kelly Cox carried the Harlan (20-10) offense with 21 points, hitting seven of 12 3-pointers.

"She played a good game tonight, and she's been coming on at the end of the season," Akal said.

"We didn't want to give them open looks," Nolan said. "I thought we let Kelly get her feet set too often, but we wanted to make Ashley to have to move to get the ball. We didn't want her to get in a rhythm. We did a pretty good job. We didn't just concentrate on her. They have other players capable of having big nights, like Kelly tonight. Our guards were doing a good job digging and our posts were sealing off."

Harlan County hit six of 10 shots in the first quarter to take the early lead. Carroll hit three of four shots inside and Davenport added two jumpers as the Lady Bears were ahead 15-8 by the end of the period.

The HCHS zone succeeded in controlling Mullins early, especially in the second quarter, when she had no shots from the field. Cox kept the Lady Dragons close with three straight 3-pointers in the period. Her final trey of the half cut the Lady Bears' lead to 25-21. Two free throws by Davenport and a jumper from Lauren Lee stretched the HCHS lead to 29-23 at halftime.

Harlan hit only three of seven at the free throw line in the first half, but the Lady Bears found themselves in early foul trouble as Sarah Evans had three and three other starters had two.

"We didn't have a great shooting night, but a lot of it was because of early foul trouble. We had people step in and give us big minutes," Nolan said. Neither team scored for almost six minutes in the third quarter Brooklyn Massingill finally scored off a drive. A Mullins free throw with 1:50 left was the first point of the period for Harlan, which trailed 33-26 at the end of the quarter. Harlan County hit two of 10 shots in the quarter and Harlan hit one of eight.

"We had several opportunities in the third quarter to close the gap. We had four or five stops, but we took some quick shots and didn't look inside," Akal said. "We had them in foul trouble. I think we just panicked a little bit and got ourselves in trouble."

The offensive struggles continued into the fourth quarter as Massingill's jumper with 5:24 left was the first score of the period. Cox hit a 3-pointer for Harlan with 4:10 remaining. She had another trey with 2:24 left to cut the deficit to 37-32, but Davenport put the game away by handling the basketball and hitting four straight free throws. Cox's third 3-pointer of the quarter with 21.3 seconds closed the scoring for Harlan, cutting the deficit to eight. Davenport and Massingill each hit one of two at the line in the closing seconds.

The game marked the end of four Lady Dragons' high school careers — Mullins, Madison Ball, Gabrielle Rehnborg and Chiah Davis.

"I'm proud to have been associated with these four seniors. They left the program in good hands," Akal said.

HARLAN (20-10)

Madison Ball 0-6 0-0 0, Kelly Cox 7-12 0-0 21, Jourdan Ledford 1-9 0-1 3, Ashley Mullins 3-4 4-9 10, Gabrielle Rehnborg 0-1 1-2 1, Torri Mitchell 0-1 0-0 0, Chiah Davis 0-0 0-0 0, Taylor Cochran 0-0 0-0 0, Masie Charles 0-0 0-0 0, Jordan Brock 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 11-33 5-12 35.

HARLAN COUNTY (23-6)

Miranda Davenport 4-14 8-12 19, Brooklyn Massingill 4-8 1-3 10, Kaitlyn Stittums 0-2 0-0 0, Kalee Carroll 5-10 2-2 12, Sarah Evans 1-2 0-1 2, Keisha Mimes 0-2 0-0 0, Lauren Lee 1-2 0-0 2, Madison Cornett 0-0 0-0 0, Bella Noe 0-0 0-0 0, Shauntae Lewis 0-0 0-0 0, Shannon Shackelford 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 15-40 11-18 45.

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|
| Harlan | | 8 | 15 | 3 | 9 | — | 35 |
| Harlan County | 15 | 14 | 4 | 12 | — | 45 | |

3-point goals: Harlan 8-22 (Cox 7-10, Ledford 1-7, Ball 0-5), Harlan County 4-11 (Davenport 3-5, Massingill 1-4, Stittums 0-1, Lee 0-1). Rebounds: Harlan 22 (Mullins 11, Ball 4, Rehnborg 3, Mitchell 3, Ledford 1), Harlan County 25 (Davenport 6, Evans 6, Stittums 5, Mimes 3, Massingill 2, Carroll 2, Lee 1). Turnovers: Harlan 14, Harlan County 5. Fouled out: None.