

By JOHN HENSON

Harlan County Sports.com

CORBIN — Championship seasons don't always arrive when you expect them.

Clay County was a popular choice to win a regional title last season with a senior-dominated squad that featured several high-profile players. A disappointing loss to Corbin ended the Tigers' hopes in the regional semifinals, and the expectations weren't nearly as high when the current season opened with four new starters, but the Tigers find themselves back in the semifinals following a 66-58 win over Harlan County on Thursday in a first-round matchup featuring the two teams ranked at the top of the region most of the year.

"This team has no superstars, but they play really hard. There is no jealousy and they don't care who scores. It's like a family. It feels good to coach a bunch like that," said second-year Clay County coach Robert Marcum said. "

After perhaps the best regular season in the county since the powerhouse Harlan teams of the mid 1990s, the year ended with a thud for Harlan County (27-6), which lost its last two games — to Middlesboro in the 52nd District Tournament finals and then to Clay County in the opening round of the regional.

The Bears' season ended in the first round of the regional for the fourth straight season. Harlan County will bring back five of its top six players, plus the region's best freshman team, but Jones says an attitude change is a must if the Bears are to break through in the postseason.

"I saw two kids who were upset enough to shed a few tears, and one of them didn't get in the game," Harlan County coach Mike Jones said. "You'd expect them to be a little more hurt. It puts a little damper on winning 27 games. I'm disappointed we didn't finish the season better. The kids coming back next year have to decide how much it means to them. I'm tired of coming down here and losing in the first round of the regional." Clay County focused its defensive efforts on keeping junior point guard Tyler Brewer out of the lane. Brewer had a huge game against Clay in last year's regional tournament.

"I feel Brewer is the motor of that team. We really forced him into taking some low-percentage shots, which I felt was the key," Marcum said. "We tried to do different things with a box and one and triangle and two on him and (Alex) Sergent. We tried a 1-1-3. The kids took the gameplan and did real well. Harlan County is a heck of a team. I hope we can ride the momentum into Saturday."

Clay County led by only one at halftime before junior guard Kody Reed caught fire in the third period, hitting five straight shots, including three 3-pointers, as the Tigers built a 48-36 lead.

"He's a heck of a player. When he has a good game we usually win," Marcum said. "He's a kid who is also an excellent defensive player." "We were supposed to be out there denying the kids who made all the shots the ball," Jones said. "We did a poor job of that. That's all you can say."

Two straight baskets by reserve senior forward Zach Kemp gave Clay its biggest lead at 16 points early in the fourth quarter.

"You have to give Clay credit. They shot 64 percent the second half. We just didn't make the plays and they did," Jones said.

Harlan County battled back with a press and a string of 3-pointers. Chad Massingill had eight of the next nine HCHS points as the deficit was sliced to 56-45 with 4:48 to play. Freshman forward Zach Caldwell and Massingill hit treys on consecutive trips to cut it to 57-54. Sergent's 3-pointer with 1:03 to play made it a two-point game.

Brewer and Sergent each had chances to pull the Bears back within two after McDaniel hit two free throws, but both failed to convert. Clay put the game away at the line, hitting seven of eight.

"I felt we had a run in us, and we did," Jones said. "We talked during the timeouts what we needed to do. We cut it to two, but we didn't finish."

"We had a good lead with six minutes to go and we wanted to be patient with it," Marcum said. "We were playing the clock at the time, but we didn't want to stop the offense. Our kids had a hard time at that point. We wanted to spread them out. We figured they would get desperate and come double and we'd get a backdoor layup or something. We played a little trying not to lose, and you can't do that. But we learned from it. When the momentum went back their way, we bowed our backs and made some plays and hit some free throws. I'm proud of our kids. Brandon Work and Stephon Lyttle hit some big free throws and everyone contributed."

Freshman guard Tyler McDaniel scored 17 to lead the balanced Clay attack that also featured 13 points from Reed, 12 from Lyttle and 11 from Zach McGeorge.

Harlan County was led by its trio of junior guards — Massingill with 18, Brewer with 15 and Sergent with 12.

McGeorge had two baskets in the opening six minutes as Clay built a 9-4 lead. HCHS closed the period with an 8-0 run, sparked by 3-pointers from Brewer and Sergent, to take a 12-9 lead.

Lyttle carried the Tigers' offense in the second quarter as he hit four of four shots from the field. The lead changed hands six times in the final four minutes, the last coming in the closing seconds as Word broke free for a layup that put the Tigers up 25-24 at halftime.

Clay County will play Pineville on Saturday at 3:30 in the semifinals.

Pineville, an upset winner over Barbourville in the 51st District

Tournament, knocked off Corbin 56-51 in last night's second game. Junior

center John Simpson led the 12-18 Lions with 13 points. Travis Smith scored 15 to lead the 19-11 Redhounds.

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HARLAN COUNTY (27-6)

Tyler Brewer 4-13 6-8 15, Alex Sergent 4-12 2-4 12, Chad Massingill 6-11 5-10 18, Aaron Caldwell 3-7 0-0 6, Chase Calton 1-3 1-2 3, James Bond 0-2 1-2 1, Tyler Miller 0-0 0-0 0, Zach Caldwell 1-2 0-0 3, Cody Bumgardner 0-0 0-0 0, Trey Sanders 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 19-50 15-26 58.

CLAY COUNTY (23-10)

Tyler McDaniel 5-15 7-9 17, Zach McGeorge 5-10 1-4 11, Kody Reed 5-9 0-1 13, Stephon Lyttle 5-10 2-2 12, Steven Wagers 1-1 0-0 2, Brandon Word 3-5 1-2 7, Zack Kemp 2-2 0-1 4, Sam Carr 0-0 0-0 0, Jordan White 0-0 0-0 0. Totals: 26-52 11-19 66.

Harlan County	12	12	12	22	—	58
Clay County	9	16	23	18	—	66

3-point goals: Harlan County 5-11 (Sergent 2-5, Z. Caldwell 1-1, Brewer 1-2, Massingill 1-2, Bond 0-1), Clay County 3-8 (Reed 3-4, McGeorge 0-1, McDaniel 0-3). Rebounds: Harlan County 30 (A. Caldwell 7, Calton 6, Brewer 4, Z. Caldwell 4, Sergent 3, Massingill 3, Bond 2, Miller 1), Clay County 34 (Lyttle 8, McDaniel 6, McGeorge 6, Wagers 6, Word 5, Reed 2, Kemp 1). Turnovers: Harlan County 14, Clay County 18. Assists: Harlan County 10 (Brewer 6), Clay County 8 (McGeorge 4). Fouled out: Clay County (Reed, Wagers), Harlan County (Brewer). Technical fouls: Harlan County (Brewer).

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Pineville (56) — Asher 9, Simpson 18, Philpot 13, Collett 9, Jeffrey 7.  
Corbin (51) — West 4, Maguet 5, Farley 9, Smith 15, Grubb 13, Berezutchi 3, Hill 2.