

ETHS boys basketball: Slow start costs Kits on the road

Dennis Mahoney, *ETHS Sports Information*

Evanston's basketball team has plenty of opportunities to play like road warriors in the month of January.

Maybe it will happen Tuesday in Skokie. Maybe the Wildkits will jump off the bus and pounce on a Niles North team that is expected to earn the No. 1 ranking when Class 4A sectional tournament seeds are decided in a couple of weeks.

But it didn't happen Saturday.

Evanston's slow start resulted in an uphill battle all the way, and that allowed Rolling Meadows to earn payback for an earlier loss to the Kits. The Mustangs converted 12-of-14 free throw attempts in the fourth quarter, enough to secure a 63-61 home victory.

Coach Mike Ellis' squad never led but did stage a furious fourth quarter comeback even after leading scorer Theo Rocca (19 points) fouled out with 95 seconds left in the game. Senior guard Kaidan Chatham tried to rally ETHS, netting nine of his 15 points in the fourth period, but couldn't prevent the Kits from falling to 14-3 on the season.

Rolling Meadows, which lost to Evanston 59-54 on a neutral court at the Fenton Thanksgiving tournament, improved to 15-2 behind Ian Miletic's 20 points as one of four Mustangs in double figures.

Easing into a game on the road isn't exactly a trait that Ellis and his coaching staff embrace. Saturday, that mentality cost the Kits, as the Mustangs didn't exactly start fast, either, leading 8-6 after the first quarter break.

"It's all about our mindset," Ellis explained. "We got off to a slow start, and we didn't take advantage of their slow start. When we just wait to see how a game unfolds, and we're not the aggressor, then that's when we're exposed.

"We played too inconsistent to beat a really good team like that on their home floor. We missed free throws, we missed around the rim and we have no one to blame but ourselves for this loss. We didn't come in here expecting this game to be the challenge like we needed to."



Head coach Mike Ellis wasn't satisfied with the Wildkits' mindset going into Saturday's game at Rolling Meadows. Credit: Michael Kellams/thatphotodad.com

The Mustangs, who were coming off a big Mid-Suburban League win over Hersey the previous night, didn't give Evanston an opening for a comeback. They didn't turn the ball over (nine total turnovers) and didn't miss a free throw until the final minute of play.

The winners shot 51% (20-of-39) from the field on their home floor and went 18-for-20 at the free throw line. Evanston, meanwhile shot 22-of-52

(42%), including a 7-of-23 effort from 3-point range.

“Their pressure [defense] got to us,” Ellis admitted. “They took us out of our execution on offense when actually that pressure should have assisted us [by breaking through for high percentage shots]. Rolling Meadows hit some key shots when we were coming and coming [in the fourth quarter]. It seemed like they took advantage of their good looks, and we came away empty.

“Losing Theo [Rocca] didn’t help. He ran through a guy with established position for that fifth foul. He didn’t come out aggressive enough, and we need to seem him play like that for a full 32 minutes.”

Rocca’s 3-point bucket with 2:12 left in the game — his only trey of the contest — pulled Evanston within 50-49 after the visitors had trailed 42-35 at the start of the fourth quarter. The Mustangs’ Lazar Lazarevic, however, responded with his only 3-pointer of the game, and soon Rocca exited with his fifth personal.

Chatham tossed in a 3-point attempt to keep it close at 61-59 with 10.8 seconds left, and then Lazarevic converted a pair of free tosses to put the game out of reach.

Evanston resumes action Tuesday at Niles North and plays Glenbrook North on the road next Friday.