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As a sportswriter and sports editor at The Courier-Tribune for 34 years as well as helping webcast for Sportstone since its inception, I truly believed I had seen everything there was to see in high school sports.

Then I saw something Friday night I had never seen before and I still have a very difficult time believing it really happened.

But it did.

On Friday afternoon, Sportstone's Tony Wright called me and said the webstation was going to add another game to its already impressive schedule of broadcasting high school basketball and asked if I would be able to help Bruce Trogon with the Eastern Randolph at Wheatmore varsity boys game later that night.

Tony and Bruce have been great to me since I started helping them years ago, so I figured if they needed help and I was available, I should certainly help.

Besides, I thought to myself, it shouldn't be much of a game because I knew Eastern Randolph was going to be vastly undermanned because of team defections and Covid-19 quarantines.

Bruce and I had webcast the game the first time these two teams played this season when ER had a number of other players available and the Warriors still recorded a 44-41 win on a very-late 3-pointer. Minus a number of those players for this game, ER wasn't going to stand a chance against WHS.

Or so I thought.

On the way to the game, I was pouring over some notes I prepared and mentioned to Bruce that there very well could be a three-way tie for second place in the Piedmont Athletic Conference. With only two teams receiving automatic playoff berths, I thought it would be very intriguing to see Wheatmore, Providence Grove and Trinity all finish with 7-5 league marks, which I predicted would happen. That, of course, meant WHS and Trinity would beat the undermanned Wildcats before the regular season came to an end.

When we arrived at WHS, the first person I saw when I entered the gym was ER head coach Lucious Haley. I have always liked and respected Coach Haley and that respect grew even more this year when he took over the ER program for a third time. The Wildcats were looking for a coach after a number of years of changes at the head coaching position and Haley accepted the challenge of attempting to right a program that had been on a downslide.

Coach Haley asked me where ER stood in the standings and I told him what I told Bruce on the way over, it was very likely that there would be a three-way tie for second place in the league, behind only Randleman.

During our conversation, I opened the ER scorebook to copy down the Wildcats' roster and I thought there was a mistake. I knew some players had left the program, but I also knew Coach Haley was going to bring up a number of kids from the jayvee team to fill out the varsity roster. But there were a total of only SIX names on the Wildcats' side of the scorebook. I questioned Coach Haley about this and he told me you have to play with the kids you have.

He then talked about how these six players were kids he would be pleased to go into any game with. That these six players are hard working, intelligent, team-before-self players. These six players were coachable and would always give everything they had every time they took the floor.

I told him I knew his players would play hard, they always do. But you have SIX players.

"They're going to battle, I promise you," Haley said.

Yea, I thought, until the fourth quarter when all but the most in-shape student-athletes would surely fatigue.

The Wildcats played hard the first 12 minutes of the game, but Wheatmore, with its deadly 3-point shooting, grabbed a 14-point lead. The Wildcats were a little slow getting out on the Warriors' 3-point shooters and WHS made them pay.

The Warriors were leading 30-16, just as I expected.



*Eastern Randolph's Delonte Glover.  
Photo provided by Bridgette Enloe Kiser.*



*Wildcats senior Donovan Lara (#5). Photo provided by  
Bridgette Enloe Kiser.*

But I kept remembering what Coach Haley said before the game about how this group of kids would never give up and how they would fight until the final buzzer.

Then things began to change. The ER starting lineup consisted of Brody Gardner, Bryce Foland, Connor Carter, Donovan Lara and Delonte Glover and it was those five who played the entire first quarter with no substitutions. I looked up in the second quarter when ER was making a bit of a run to get back in the game and it was those same five players on the floor.

The Wildcats had scored the last 12 points of the first half and now trailed just 30-28. When Gardner nailed a 3-pointer to start the second half, the Wildcats had put the finishing touches on a 15-0 run that gave them the lead. It was the same five starters still on the floor for the Wildcats.

As the third quarter buzzer sounded, it was the same five ER players leaving the floor and when the fourth quarter began, guess what? It was the same five players coming back for the final eight minutes.

Gardner, Lara, Glover, Foland and Carter exhibited incredible drive, determination, athleticism and teamwork, the traits Coach Haley said we would see from his undermanned team.

But it was the fourth quarter and surely there would be signs of fatigue: Missed free throws, slow defensive changes and sloppy passes. Those never happened. Just outright determination from a group of five players who were going to prove that it didn't matter how many players were on the team, it only mattered how those five players played together.

The Wildcats took a late lead and held on as a flurry of 3-point shots from the Warriors clanged off the rim. The buzzer sounded and the Wildcats had a 62-58 victory. I was stunned.



*The Wildcats after their 62-58 PAC 7 win on February 12, 2021: (L to R) D Lara, C Carter, D Glover, P Ulysses, B Foland and B Gardner. Photo provided by Jana Lee Webb.*

I finally got Coach Haley's attention and had him walk up to where we were broadcasting for a postgame interview. He was smiling and when he talked about those five players and the effort they gave that night, there was a crack in his voice and I swear I saw some tears.

He was that proud of his players and he should have been.

It was an incredible effort by the Iron Five of ER, an effort I was fortunate to see.

The Wildcats will be undermanned again this week in games against Randleman and Trinity, two of the best in the PAC. I have no idea what the outcome will be, but I know the Wildcats are going to fight

once the ball is inbounded at the start of the game until the final buzzer sounds.

Isn't that all a coach can ask for?

With Eastern Randolph, that question was answered with the effort those five players gave on Friday night. It was truly something I have never seen before and probably won't see again.

Until at least Monday night, when the Wildcats take the floor once again.