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RANDLEMAN - Pride and disappointment are two emotions that are not experienced at the same time very often. Unless it's in the context of high school sports. For no matter the sport, only one team will experience the ultimate thrill of winning a state championship, while the hundreds of other teams around the state end the season disappointed.

But that doesn't mean they end the season without a sense of pride, an enormous sense of pride. The Randleman High School girls varsity basketball team should be experiencing an incredible sense of pride despite seeing their run for a state championship end Saturday in the Elite Eight round of the state 2-A NCHSAA playoffs.

Sure, there's disappointment. The work and energy put into a specific goal that is not reached ultimately leads to disappointment. But that feeling should be drowned in a feeling of pride and accomplishment. The RHS girls varsity basketball team accomplished so much and achieved a great deal during the 2021 season, a season full of hoops to run through, hurdles to jump, mountains to climb and obstacles to clear.



*Coach Brandon Varner addresses the Tigers during a PAC 7 game against Jordan-Matthews on February 5, 2021.*

After a couple of wins in the first and second rounds of the state 2-A tournament, the Tigers found themselves up against Farmville Central, which has experienced more success over the past few seasons than any other team in the state. The Jaguars advanced to the state championship in 2019, falling to Mountain Heritage for the title. Farmville Central advanced to the state championship game once again in 2020, only to have the title game cancelled due to the virus that was sweeping the nation.

The Jaguars rolled through the abbreviated 2021 regular season and then earned easy playoff victories over Kinston (72-24) and North Pitt (78-57). FCHS entered Saturday's game against the Tigers with a perfect 12-0 mark, impressive by itself. But look a little deeper and the Jaguars were not only unbeaten, they averaged 73.9 points per game while allowing just 28.8, an average winning margin of 45.1 points per game. Amazing.

And that level of talent was seen early on Saturday as the Jaguars' pressure defense, height, strength and quickness allowed them to jump into an early lead against the Tigers.

This was going to get ugly. But Randleman wouldn't allow that to happen.



*Gracy Hall looks for an outlet after securing a rebound against Jordan-Matthews, Feb 5, 2021.*

After recovering from the initial shock of playing against one of the elite teams in the state, the Tigers regrouped and played hard, they played with more aggression and more importantly, they played as a team. Passes were a little more crisp, breaking the pressure was a little more successful and shots falling through the net were a little more prevalent.

With about 30 seconds to go in the first half, Randleman had pulled to within five points of the Jaguars. Farmville Central scored the final two buckets of the first half for a nine-point halftime lead and then started the second half with a big run to assume control.



*Hannah Hinshaw on defense, Feb 5, 2021.*



But the Tiger kept scratching and clawing, forcing the Jaguars to call a pair of timeouts in the second half, something I guess they hadn't had to do very much, if at all, this entire season. With Elizabeth York, Gracyn Hall, Veronica Marlow, Hannah Hinshaw and Audra Petty leading the way, the Tigers pulled to within 13 in the final quarter.

If this was a fairy book story, the Tigers would have somehow found a way to post a "David defeats Goliath" victory. They didn't and the Jaguars went on to complete a 71-54 victory.

Disappointing for the Tigers? Sure.

But the Jaguars knew they were in a battle. It wasn't easy for them and that's because the Tigers continued to battle with everything they had until the final buzzer sounded. The Jaguars scored more points and they certainly recorded more rebounds, but they didn't outplay the Tigers, they didn't show more heart and they certainly didn't show more determination.



*Veronica Marlow fights for a loose ball, Feb 5, 2021.*



*Audra Petty layup, Feb 5, 2021.*

Coach Brandon Varner has done an incredible job revitalizing a once-proud program that has certainly experienced some lean years in the past - 11-109 record during a recent five-year stretch. The girls have listened, learned and worked hard to bring the program back to where it was under coaches Brian Nance and Terry Linthicum. They won another Piedmont Athletic Conference regular season championship and represented their school and conference very well in the state tournament.

Disappointment? That was easily seen as Varner talked to Sportstone after the game.

Pride? That was even easier to see.

It was another great year for the Tigers and I truly hope that disappointment experienced Saturday has faded away and has since been replaced by pride. It should. Varner and the Tigers should be

nothing but proud of their accomplishments this season.