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By Dennis Garcia
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RAMSEUR - Big-time players make big-time plays in big-time games.

In the two biggest games the Eastern Randolph High School basketball program has ever played - those being the West Regional semifinal and the regional final this past week - no one has been bigger than senior sharp-shooting guard Pierce Leonard.



Wildcat senior Pierce Leonard, front. Photo provided.

Every Wildcats player has contributed in this year's run to Saturday's 1-A state championship game against Wilson Prep, which will be played at noon at N.C. State's Reynolds Coliseum. But simply put, without the incredible showing of Leonard in the second halves of the regional semifinal against South Stokes and in the regional championship game against Bishop McGuinness, the basketball jerseys already would have been washed and put away until the opening of the 2023-24 season.

"Pierce is a leader of ours," said ER first-year head coach Johnny Thomas, who has led the Wildcats to a 29-2 record and its first state championship appearance in school history. "He gets out there and gives you everything. He has a motor that, once he turns on, he doesn't turn it off."

And he has a pretty deadly shot as well.

In the regional semifinal game in front of a hostile South Stokes crowd, the Wildcats found themselves down by nine points at halftime. Behind an incredibly strong defensive performance and 17 of his 21 points in the second half, the Wildcats rallied for a 74-71 victory. With the game tied and just seconds to play, Leonard recorded a steal at midcourt that led to the go-ahead points.

Then in the regional finals this past Saturday at Freedom High School in Morganton, the Wildcats were left for dead at halftime, trailing 41-20 with a number of starting players in serious foul trouble. Leonard, however, wasn't about to let the Wildcats' run to the state title game end as he fueled a key 13-point run to start the second half, scored 14 points in the

third quarter and 10 more in the fourth to finish with a game-high 28 points, in leading ER to a miraculous, yes, miraculous 62-59 victory over Bishop McGuinness.

"To be successful in basketball, you have to have grit, determination and a will to win," said Thomas, who played collegiately at N.C. State and Marshall. "He has the will. At the beginning of the year, he was a little rusty coming off a different season, but he found his way quickly. Pierce is a phenomenal kid. He has fun and he understands what his goal is."

For the season, Leonard is averaging 11.7 points and 4.1 assists per game. In the last two games, when the Wildcats needed him most, he is averaging 24.5 points per game.

A big-time player for big-time games. And there won't be a bigger game than Saturday.



*Eastern Randolph's Pierce Leonard.
Photo provided.*