



Girls Basketball: Deep first-half hole leaves Montclair on wrong side of 50-26 loss



Coach Paul Palek and the Montclair Mounties struggled early in their semifinal loss to Morristown.

Staff Photo by ANDREW GARDA

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The Montclair girls basketball team showed a lot of guts in the second half against Morristown, but couldn't crawl out of the hole they'd dug in the first two periods. The 1-seed Colonials came out roaring, outscoring the Mounties 27-7 in the first half, the result of which was a 50-26 loss and an end to the Mounties' run in the NJSIAA state playoffs.

Montclair, the 13-seed, had soundly defeated 5-seed Paterson Kennedy on Wednesday by a score of 54-40, and [beaten 4-seed Fair Lawn 52-36](#) the previous Monday.

The gap between Montclair and Morristown was too great, though, and it showed — especially in the first half.

"They were 25-2 [in the regular season] for a reason," Coach Paul Palek said after the loss, referring to the

Colonials. "They beat good teams, they play a good schedule. They're really well coached. They're just really good and I knew it was going to take a big-time effort for us to come up here and win the game."

While the Mounties gave the effort in the second half, they struggled early.

Montclair was unable to break into the paint at all during the first two quarters, while Morristown's Elizabeth Strambi (12 points) and Kayla Bush (12 points) dominated inside when the Colonials were on offense. Bush's height was tough to overcome and Strambi gashed the interior of the Mountie defense as she drove to the basket.

"We couldn't get going offensively early on," Palek said. "You get down 20 to a good team and it's going to be tough to get yourself back into the game."



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Morristown jammed the inside lanes and forced the Mounties to the perimeter, disrupting the ball movement Montclair had been successful with in the first two rounds of the playoffs. They were completely unable to slash inside, and rarely got a clean look at any location on the court as Morristown's defense was relentless.

When Montclair did get shots, the ball just didn't drop for them. Normally reliable shooters like Bianca Fede (7 points) were ice cold, and aside from 7 points by Alisa Wiggins (11 points), nobody seemed to be able to get the ball through the hoop.

Despite what must have been a disheartening first half, the Mounties responded in the third quarter. Fede scored 5 points with Jill Jennings (5 points) and Wiggins adding another 4 points total, and the Mounties outscored the Colonials 9-7 in the third frame.

While the offense was beginning to come back to life, the defense stiffened as well. The Mounties were able to disrupt Strambi's inside attacks, keeping her from driving the lane and suddenly it was Morristown's turn to struggle.

By the end of the third, Montclair was still trailing 34-16, but the momentum of the game felt like it was shifting. The ball was dropping in the basket for the Mounties and Morristown seemed to be a little off-balance.

The Mounties kicked off the fourth quarter with a 6-2 run, capped by a beautiful steal and score by Jennings to close the gap to 13 points.

Momentum is a fickle thing, though, and it turned back against Montclair as Morristown regained their shooting form and rattled off 14 straight points. The Mounties wouldn't score again until the final minute of play.

While the end of the season didn't break in the Mounties' favor, Palek thought it was an enjoyable one and pointed to the success the team has had over the course of the last few seasons.

"We've got great kids. This group — eight seniors, Bianca (Fede) and a couple of juniors — they've played in six state games in two years. We've won four on the road. We've played our best basketball at the right time and two years in a row we find ourselves playing in the state semifinal."

Now the long off-season awaits, and the coaching staff will face the challenge of rebooting the team and building on the last two years with some new faces.