

Montclair Basketball: ICHS girls misfire in 36-25 ECT finals loss to West Orange



Immaculate's Taylor Williams goes up for one of her three baskets against West Orange in the Essex County Championships on Saturday, February 23.

ANDREW GARDA/STAFF

by Andrew Garda

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NEWARK—It was the first time since 1990 that the Immaculate Conception girls basketball team had been in an Essex County tournament final.

It showed during much of the 36-25 loss to first time

champions West Orange, as the Lions struggled with turnovers and rebounds all game long, never getting into a rhythm shooting.

“Every one of my girls, it’s the first time they’ve played in a game of this magnitude,” head coach Joe Whalen said after the loss. “So that’s to be expected. There’s no scouting report for that, there’s no drill for that. It is what it is.

In fairness, it showed on sides of the court, as the Mountaineers went through stretches where they couldn’t get anything going either.

The difference was the turnovers, especially in the first half when Immaculate lost possession eleven times. And these weren’t balls lost to stout defense or crashing the lane. These were self-inflicted.

“Unforced turnovers,” Whalen said. “You know, you can live with aggressive turnovers, [but] it’s a tough pill to swallow with unforced turnovers.”

While the Lions were turning the ball over, the Mountaineers were slowly building a lead and ended the first quarter up 11-5. It could have been worse, as West Orange missed several easy shots of their own.

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It kept the Lions in the game early, but ICHS kept getting in their own way.

That kept up in the second quarter for both teams as both struggled to do anything on offense for much of the 8 minutes. In fact, the first basket came with just 1:15 seconds left in

the half, and the two teams scored just six points total.

Luckily for Immaculate, they came out ahead 4-2, cutting the lead to 13-9 at the half.

Against Tech on Thursday, the Lions came out hot in the third quarter and ran away from their opponent. This game looked like it could be more of the same, as Kendra Lawrence and Nasira Williams put up a quick six points to get their first lead of the game.

After ICHS led 15-13, West Orange called a timeout and momentum shifted again.

All game long, Mountaineers Kiley Capstraw and Mya Bembry were a problem for the Lions. Coming out of the break, freshman Capstraw scored five points and with a pair of free throws by Ebony Odombarnes, W0 was back on top 19-17.

Capstraw and Bembry were the only West Orange players to score from the floor, with all the other baskets for the Mountaineers coming from the charity stripe. Despite knowing this was the case, the Lions never found a way to contain them, with Capstraw finishing with 18 points and Bembry, 11.

If the Mountaineers could only score with two players, the entire team was contributing on defense.



Nasira Williams drives to the basket while covered by West Orange's Bianca Fede. Williams was contained throughout the Lions' 36-25 loss.

ANDREW GARDA/STAFF

Normally the Immaculate girls score early and often, but no player broke double-digit points, with Taylor Williams leading the team with 9, Kendra Lawrence next with 5 and four different players with three or less points. Further the normally electric perimeter game was absent, with the Lions making only four baskets from 3-point range.

The Lions ended the game shooting just 9-of-28, with minimal amounts of 3-point attempts, much less baskets. For a team which can live or die with a 3-point shot, both those stats are eye-opening and spelled trouble.

"I mean credit to them, they defended us well, they scouted us well, they switched things, they took away our slips on us," Whalen said. "Lots of ball pressure, and you know, the two girls who score a lot for them scored a lot for them."

West Orange had built a 19-17 by the end of the third as they started to slow the ball down and sap the clock, and Immaculate chose to start fouling. Three of WO's six points to end the third quarter were from the free throw line, the other three coming from the perimeter by Capstraw.

The march to the line continued as Immaculate tried to get the ball back as quickly as possible, which often required fouling.

The last seven points of the game were by the Mountaineers on free throws.

While this was a disappointing loss for IC, Whalen said he's not letting the girls get down, as there is a lot of season left.

"We still have the state tournament," he said. "It's not over. One of the goals we made was to get to this game, which we did. One of the goals was to win the division, which we did, and now one of the goals is to win a sectional championship. So, it's still on the board."

The Lions start the NJSIAA tournament on Wednesday as the No.4-seeded team, hosting 13-seeded Benedictine, tipping off at 7pm.