

Press Clippings 3/8/2022

Daily Herald

Beyond the Byline: High School Sports Editor John Radtke -

-- 3/7/2022

Daily Herald Report



John Radtke

High School Sports Editor John Radtke grew up a high school sports junkie, officially starting his journalism career as a sophomore at Burlington Central High School, writing for the school paper and calling in basketball box scores to the Elgin Courier-News.

A native of western Kane County, Radtke began working for the Elgin Courier upon graduation from high school and through his college years at Elgin Community College and Judson University.

After spending time in sports marketing, juvenile corrections and private business, Radtke returned to the Courier in 1987 before joining the Daily Herald as a freelancer in 1995. He was hired full time by the Herald in 1997 and soon after was named Fox Valley Sports Editor, a post he held until 2018, when he was named high school sports editor.

An inductee of the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association's Hall of Fame Media Wing, Radtke has won numerous journalism awards including the Daily Herald's Editorial Excellence Award in 2010, the Illinois Soccer Coaches Association Media Person of the Year and the Illinois High School Association's Distinguished Media Service Award. He was also part of a team of reporters that won a Peter Lisagor Award in 2012 for the newspaper's series on Title IX. Additionally, he won a Copley Bell in 1989 for his reporting on the **Elgin Area School District U-46** teachers strike.

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Glenbard West puts away Larkin in 2nd half to earn state berth --- 3/7/2022

By Chris Casey for Shaw Media



Glenbard West's Braden Huff (34) and Jack Oberhofer (40) celebrate their Class 4A DeKalb Supersectional game win over Larkin at the Northern Illinois University Convocation Center on Monday, March 7, 2022. *Sandy Bressner/sbressner@shawmedia.com*

Any accomplishment comes with a bit of adversity.

Not many people at Monday's Class 4A DeKalb supersectional gave **Larkin** a chance against top-ranked Glenbard West. Ahead by just three points at the halftime break, Hilltoppers senior Bobby Durkin knew his team needed a spark.

As the final seconds ticked off the third quarter clock, Durkin got a defensive rebound, took a few dribbles and let it fly from just beyond half court.

The buzzer sounded and his shot hit the bottom of the net to steal all momentum back for Glenbard West as it cruised to a 60-34 victory to advance to Friday's Class 4A state semifinals.

"That's the kind of shot you throw up in the backyard with your buddies," said Durkin, who scored 10 of his 14 points after halftime. "We mess around with those situations and take those kinds of shots in practice, but to have it come up and to go in [during] a real game was a super cool experience."

That 3-pointer turned a three-point halftime lead for Glenbard West into a 14-point advantage. The Hilltoppers outscored Larkin, 15-4, in the third quarter, punctuated by Durkin's buzzer beater.

Glenbard West (35-1) then scored the game's next 10 points to cap a 15-0 run and put the game out of reach and book the program's first trip to the state tournament in Champaign.

"I think that shot just kills any momentum for [Larkin] going into the fourth quarter," Glenbard West coach Jason Opoka said. "It was a massive shot and we call him 'Fieldhouse Bobby' for a reason."

"We still hadn't quite pulled away at that point, so hitting a shot like that was huge," said Glenbard West senior Braden Huff, who led all Hilltoppers with 15 points. "I think our emotions almost got the best of us and the whole bench almost ran over to [Bobby]. Coach had to yell at us to get back on the bench, but it was a huge shot and gave us a lot of momentum going into the fourth quarter."

Huff and Larkin's Damari Wheeler-Thomas had a back-and-forth battle throughout Monday's first half. Neither missed a shot from the field, combining for a perfect 10-for-10 shooting.

Wheeler-Thomas, who led Larkin to a program record 30 wins, drew high praise from both his coach and Opoka after what was his final game as a member of the Royals (31-4).

"Absolutely a top of the line competitor," Opoka said of Wheeler-Thomas, who led all scorers with 20 points on 8-for-10 shooting overall. "North Dakota State got an absolute steal of a player. He's a motor, can handle it, can facilitate, and is a great on-the-ball defender. Our game plan was for whoever he was guarding, to get the ball out of their hands."

"There is no better guard in the senior class in the state," Larkin coach Deryn Carter said of Wheeler-Thomas. "It doesn't matter ... point guard [shooting] guard ... I wouldn't pick any of them before I would pick Damari."

A different game plan after halftime allowed Glenbard West to force it inside to the 6-foot-11 Gonzaga commit Huff, which opened up a number of things for its offense. The Hilltoppers also forced 18 turnovers on the defensive end, which they turned into 21 points in the other direction.

After Durkin's half-court buzzer beater, Larkin never got closer than 22 points in its season-ending loss.

Glenbard West will take on Bolingbrook in Friday's 4A state semifinals. Barrington and Whitney Young will play the night's first semifinal matchup at 2:30 p.m., with Glenbard West and Bolingbrook to follow.

"We just have to continue to stay focused on ourselves," Durkin said. "It's a great feeling to win this one, but the job's not done. We know what the ultimate goal is and that's two more wins. We're going to enjoy this one [tonight] and get ready for our next one and just continue to take it one game at a time."

Chicago Tribune/The Courier-News Larkin's Damari Wheeler-Thomas shows top-ranked Glenbard West in supersectional that North Dakota State 'got a steal' --- 3/7/2022

By Paul Johnson for Aurora Beacon News



Larkin's Damari Wheeler-Thomas drives the lane against Glenbard West during the Class 4A NIU Supersectional in DeKalb on Monday, March 7, 2022. Glenbard West won 60-34. (H. Rick Bamman / The Beacon-News)

Glenbard West is a behemoth of a team, in more ways than one, and had played against some of the best guards in the state.

But the Hilltoppers hadn't seen **Larkin** senior Damari Wheeler-Thomas, a North Dakota State recruit.

“Top-of-the-line competitor,” Glenbard West coach Jason Opoka said of Wheeler-Thomas. “He can handle it. He can facilitate. He’s just a competitor. As an on-ball defender, our game plan was whoever he’s guarding, give it up to somebody else. North Dakota State got a steal.”

Wheeler-Thomas showed out during the Class 4A NIU Supersectional, scoring a game-high 20 points against the Hilltoppers. But that wasn’t enough to keep the Royals in the game.

Glenbard West turned a three-point halftime lead into a blowout, winning 60-34 to advance to state for the first time.

“Over the last two days, I can promise you this, there was nobody in the Larkin gym that didn’t believe that we were going to win,” Larkin coach Deryn Carter said.



Larkin’s Dontrell Maxie, left, guards Glenbard West’s Bobby Durkin during the Class 4A NIU Supersectional in DeKalb on Monday, March 7, 2022. (H. Rick Bamman / The Beacon-News)

Wheeler-Thomas hit a pair of 3-pointers and scored 12 points in the first half to keep the Royals (30-4) within striking distance despite their nine turnovers.

“That was all part of the plan,” Carter said. “We thought that if we could stay close, with the guard play we have, anything can happen. We thought with the college court if we brought them out, we’d be able to spread them out a little bit. We just turned it over too much to sustain anything.”

Glenbard West (35-1), which is ranked No. 1 in 4A in the poll by The Associated Press and which has starters ranging in height from 6 feet 4 to 6-11, came out of halftime dominating.

The Hilltoppers opened the second half on a 25-4 run punctuated by senior guard/forward Bobby Durkin’s half-court 3-pointer at the third-quarter buzzer.



Larkin's Fernando Perez Jr., left, guards Glenbard West's Braden Huff during the Class 4A NIU Supersectional in DeKalb on Monday, March 7, 2022. (H. Rick Bamman / The Beacon-News)

"I feel like that gave them more momentum, at the buzzer too, the fans with them, everything," Wheeler-Thomas said.

Gonzaga-bound senior center Braden Huff paced Glenbard West with 15 points. Durkin added 14, and senior guard Paxton Warden scored 13.

"I have all the respect in the world for Larkin," Opoka said. "They had a fantastic season. Our hats go off to them for competing at a high level."

Jakob Blakley scored 12 for Larkin. The sophomore guard figures to be the focal point of the offense next season after starters Dontrell Maxie, Fernando Perez Jr., Jamarion Stubbs and Wheeler-Thomas graduate.

"It was really nice, especially on this big of a stage being this young," Blakley said. "Just in case I come back here, I have the experience, so that was really nice."



Larkin's Jakob Blakley (o) splits Glenbard West's Ryan Renfro (45) and Paxton Warden (24) on a drive during the Class 4A NIU Supersectional in DeKalb on Monday, March 7, 2022. (H. Rick Bamman / The Beacon-News)

But Wheeler-Thomas was the star, and Huff was effusive in his praise.

"Damari is a really good player, a really tough guy to stop," Huff said. "He had a really good first half."

Hearing that impressed Wheeler-Thomas.

"I'd say it's just the same as any other team really, but when they have five guys going Division I, they're the head of the snake," Wheeler-Thomas said. "I'd say that's something."

Carter pulled Wheeler-Thomas and Perez up to varsity during the summer before their freshman season. Winning a sectional title was the payoff.

Carter got to coach his star guard one more time Monday.

"North Dakota State, I like their coaches a lot," Carter said. "I love their program. They got an absolute steal. There is no better guard in the senior class in the state — point guard, two guard. I wouldn't pick any of them in an open gym over Mari."