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Hillsboro Hawks Finish Strong

By **Jerome Boettcher**
Staff writer
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Chris O'Connell couldn't have made the message any clearer.

The Hillsboro basketball coach scribbled it down on the chalkboard, in case his team forgot Friday's night theme - Finish.

Disappointed by the lack of execution in the Hawks' first two games, O'Connell was hoping to see more life in his team down the stretch.

Point taken.

Hillsboro ended both halves in decisive fashion Friday, pulling away for a 51-35 victory over visiting De Soto in the semifinals of the 53rd annual Gene Steighorst Tournament.

The Hawks, the No. 2 seed in the eight-team field, were to play in the tournament title game for the first time in five years Saturday against the top seed and defending champ Francis Howell Central. Central defeated Northwest 55-50 in Friday's first semifinal contest. De Soto, the No. 3 seed, and fifth-seeded Northwest were hoping to end the tournament with a win, battling it out in the third-place game Saturday.

On Friday, Hillsboro ended the game on a 20-0 run that included 13 combined points from seniors Lance Kiggans and Zack Winchester. De Soto had no answer for Hillsboro's finishing kick. The Dragons failed to score for the last 5 minutes and 20 seconds.

The Hawks were down 35-31 at the time of their comeback. The big finish was Hillsboro's second rally of the night. The Hawks outscored De Soto 15-4 the last six minutes of the first half to turn a nine-point deficit into a two-point lead at halftime.

It was a much different ending than Tuesday's first-round match against Bishop DuBourg. Hillsboro led by 17 after three quarters, but frittered away a chunk of the comfortable lead and wound up winning 59-52.

"Finally, we finished a game," said O'Connell, whose squad improved to 3-0. "It's not just about scoring more points and actually getting the 'W' but I thought we played aggressively. We pressed a little bit at the end. I did that almost just mentally to tell these guys that we are going to finish. We're not going to hope that they come back."

The Hawks threw out 2-3 and 1-3-1 zone defenses that seemed to give the Dragons fits as they turned the ball over 22 times. But De Soto Coach Allen Davis said Hillsboro didn't do anything differently in the last five minutes than it had all game - his team just collapsed under the weight of its errors.

"Lack of maturity, lack of discipline," Davis said. "(Hillsboro) had mature, young men. Our seniors made the majority of our turnovers. If I am going to get turnovers from a senior, I might as well play a couple more freshmen. It wasn't even basketball at all there at the end."

The Dragons, 3-1, were actually trailing by just four points with 2:06 remaining but a key



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turnover as they were bringing the ball up the court gave the Hawks life and they took advantage - making 10 of 14 free throws to end the game.

The Hawks attempted 37 free throws - compared to De Soto's four attempts - and made 26 of them. Of the 20 final points, 12 came from the free-throw line.

"They shot free throws, and we didn't," Davis said. "They got kids that can penetrate well and get in the paint."

Kevin Kramer was one of those players that made the most of his opportunities at the line. While he was two of 11 from the field, he sunk nine of 10 free throws to finish with 13 points.

"That was a big bonus there," the 6-foot-6 senior said of the free-throw shooting. "We work on that quite a bit."

Also giving Hillsboro an offensive boost was Winchester with 11 points. Leading De Soto was Jared White with 13 points.

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