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## Tension, yes. Pressure, sure. Worries, not at all.

Hillsboro squeaks by Howell Central in a thriller

By Dennis Barnidge

Tuesday, December 16, 2008 1:23 PM CST

Kevin Kramer is a no worries guy. Hakuna matata, dude.

Saturday's finals at the Gene Steighorst Tournament at Hillsboro was a pressure cooker. Back and forth, back and forth. Hillsboro would go up, then Francis Howell Central. Hillsboro again, then Howell Central again. And on and on.

It was the kind of boys basketball game where hearts beat fast, where palms sweat. Eyes dart to the scoreboard after every basket. What's the score now? What's the time?

Kramer resists the temptation to peak at the scoreboard. Usually.

"I look at it every now and then, but I was pretty confident we're going to pull through," says the tall and slender (6-foot-6, 175 pounds) Hillsboro senior.

Kramer did his part to help the Hawks pull through in Saturday's championship game of the 53rd annual Steighorst Tournament. In the final minute, he came up with a steal, snagged a clutch defensive rebound and tossed in two soft and sweet free throws with 6.7 seconds left to settle a game that had been thrillingly unsettled since the opening tip.



Kevin Kramer, Hillsboro, in the championship game against Francis Howell Central in the 53rd Annual Gene Steighorst Tournament at Hillsboro. Hillsboro won 64-59.



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Hillsboro defeated Howell Central 64-59 for its first Steighorst title since 2002. It was the Hawks' 12th championship in what has been the opening bell for Jefferson County basketball. Howell Central was the defending champ.

Hillsboro, headed to Union and Park Hills Central this week, is 4-0. Saturday was the first stumble of the year for Howell Central, 3-1.

Kramer led all scorers in Saturday's title game with 19 points. He also grabbed eight rebounds and chipped in a couple assists and a couple blocked shots.

Kramer's steady play was one of the reasons Hillsboro Coach Chris O'Connell had a sense the back-and-forth game would finish on a Hillsboro hop.

"In the De Soto game (a 51-35 tournament semifinal win Friday) and again tonight I always thought we were going to win win basketball game. I really did," he says. "And I thought we played like they (the Hawks) believed that, too."

Hillsboro had a long list of contributors Saturday. Jarrod Huskey and Andy Lemke scored 13 and 12, respectively. Huskey went six for six from the field, and Lemke made five of six shots.

Hillsboro made 24 of 37 (65 percent) shots from the field.

Jake Powers's 12-point game paced a balanced Howell Central attack that had six players score at least eight points.

Howell Central Coach Larry Anders gave Hillsboro a pat on the back. The Hawks' experience tipped the final in their favor.

"It makes a huge difference," he says. "Their seniors were playing our juniors."

Experience has left a mark or two on the Hawks. Last year, Hillsboro finished 18-9, but a bump or two down the stretch - the Hawks lost four of their last six games - took a little shine off a excellent year.

"It was a little disappointing. We thought we should've won conference. We lost some close games that we could've won, but overall it was a good year," Kramer says.

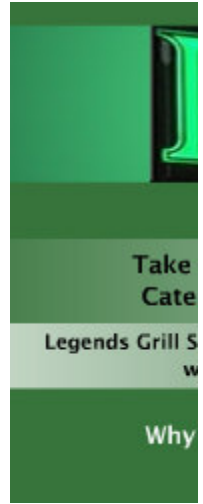
Last year's close games - even the ones that got away - figured into the Hawks' three wins at last week's Steighorst Tournament.

"Experience, even if you're just playing a crucial minute here or there can be very beneficial for you down the road. Just to go through it, even if you fail, makes a difference," O'Connell says.

Kramer argues that last year's experience prepared the Hawks for Saturday's back-and-forth final.

"We're a year older, and I think we can handle the pressure," he says.

Saturday's final, a squeaker from the start, was loaded with pressure. Howell Central had



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a 16-13 edge after one quarter and a 30-29 lead at half. Hillsboro, thanks to a stretch where Andy Lemke scored seven points in 66 seconds, led 49-48 after three quarters.

Kramer has been preparing for this - for Steighorst tourney and everything that will follow - almost every day since last season ended. He popped into the gym after school to shoot. He (and teammate Jarrod Huskey) played with the St. Louis Swarm club team. He hit the open gyms. And when there was nothing else going on, he'd be at home in the driveway shooting until he ran out of light.

"I try to shoot an hour every day," he says.

That practice has paid off. During the three Steighorst games, Kramer was 15 of 17 (88 percent) from the line and 18 of 35 (51 percent) from the field.

Impressed? Hold your applause. O'Connell says better games are ahead for Kramer. He points out the tall guard has yet to hit a 3-pointer (0-8 in the tournament).

"He doesn't have to hit 3s to contribute, but that 19 tonight on some nights is going to be 30 when he starts hitting his shots," the Hawks coach says.

Kramer is ready to be the guy who scores 30. This week, next week, sometime, that kind of game will come. That's what all those shoot-around sessions were about.

Kramer is ready, but he's not in a rush. For now, winning is plenty.

"I don't worry. I just play to win," he says.

Hakuna matata.

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