

Trinity Catholic 70, St. Mary's 57: Falcons break through in boys basketball tournament

By Kevin Stone/Daily News correspondent
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WATERTOWN — The February drizzle hadn't stopped yet, but the Trinity Catholic boys basketball team showed last night it was already ready for its version of March Madness.

After a 70-57 victory in the Division 4 North opener over No. 9 St. Mary's of Lynn, a team several of the eighth-seeded Falcons said they felt like underdogs against, TC gets a chance for a real upset Saturday against No. 1 New Mission, one of the state's top Div. 4 teams.

But don't think the Falcons were looking ahead to that game before last night.

``When we first saw the matchup (against St. Mary's), we were a little down, because we knew it would be tough," TC coach Scott Kmack said.

Kmack said a friend of his was filling out an online bracket for the MIAA tournament, similar to the NCAA brackets, and that all 16 people who had made their picks before him picked St. Mary's (12-9).

``We definitely felt like underdogs," TC senior guard John Lopes agreed.

With the consciousness that they would need to bring their best game, the Falcons started hot. TC (15-6) opened the scoring with an inside basket from senior Jeff Pascal, then went up 5-0 on a 3-pointer from senior Chizem Egesionu.

But after freshman Matt Manning scored St. Mary's first points, TC's attack slowed as the Spartans put on a three-quarter court press. St. Mary's collected second-chance opportunities on three straight possessions, yet the Spartans couldn't capitalize, only pulling within 8-4 on a couple of free throws from Manning.

Then Egesionu blocked a shot that got the gym shaking, and three minutes into the contest TC turned the tables on the glass. The Falcons ripped down three straight defensive rebounds, then forced turnovers on the next three possessions, while reeling off nine straight points.

Senior Golden Okonoboh led the run, scoring six points on an inside feed, a put-back where his feet never touched the ground, and two free throws after being fouled on an alley-oop attempt.

``We came out really strong in the first quarter, and I thought that made the difference," Kmack said of the 17-4 opening edge.

Lopes started the second quarter where the first left off, stealing the ball and sinking two free throws after a breakaway.

But if TC's runaway, high-flying dominance had been the theme of the first frame, the perils of impatience were the lesson of the second.

The St. Mary's press forced three straight turnovers over a 30-second span, converting them into a seven-point run. Sophomore Nick Gagliolo started nailing foul-line jumpers in the half-court set, and the Spartans clawed within 21-15 as the fire came back to the gym, with each pass becoming a mad scramble for possession as players dove to the floor, and batted and tipped the ball to each other.

``I called a timeout and told them, ``We knew we weren't going to blow this team off the court," Kmack said. ``We've been working on the press relentlessly all week, and we've been working on our offense against the 2-3 (zone defense)."

The Falcons forced a couple of turnovers late in the quarter, regaining their momentum, and after a Okonoboh reverse inside, and Lopes singlehandedly breaking the press and scoring on a layup, TC looked ready to enter the half up 25-15. But St. Mary's had seen daylight, and the Spartans continued to fight for the final minute.

``We're a young team," St. Mary's coach Kevin Moran said of how his team patiently worked its way back into the game in the second quarter. ``That tends to lead to struggles on the offensive end ... but once you settle down on offense, the defense comes around."

Gagliolo beat off a scrum of rebounders to tip in two points, and when Egesionu tried to break the press on his own, St. Mary's stole the ball and sank a layup at the buzzer. The Spartans trailed just 25-19 at the half.

The third quarter turned into a back-and-forth affair, with the score staying tight until TC opened a 12-point edge behind a 7-0 run and a thunderous dunk from Okonoboh. The Falcons took a 43-34 lead into the fourth.

TC capitalized on its next couple of possessions, but St. Mary's Luis Rijo countered with two straight bombs from beyond the arc. The Spartans went on a 6-0 run before TC pulled its lead back up to 12 with seven straight points.

St. Mary's got within six on some second-chance points, but with 2:08 remaining, the Spartans turned to fouling to try to close the gap. TC nailed 11 of 16 free throws in the final minutes, including eight points in a row when the Spartans failed to score on their end.

The Falcons shot 76 percent from the line, their highest mark of the season.

For seniors Lopes, Okonoboh, Egesionu and Pascal, who all played most of the game, it was a long-awaited win. After qualifying for the tournament for the last four years, TC had lost in the first round all three times, including twice in overtime.

``Glad I got it off my shoulders," said Lopes, who scored 14 points and handed out nine assists. ``Glad I got that win."

Okonoboh scored 26 points and 13 rebounds, and Egesionu had 14 points.

``I think the experience of last year - the tournament loss - left them really hungry this year," Kmack said. ``I couldn't ask for them to work any better together."

As good as the first-round win felt, the TC players say they still see it as a first step.

``Our goal is to play for the championship in the Garden," said Pascal, who scored 10 points and gathered 12 rebounds.

And although Saturday's contest (7 p.m. at the Reggie Lewis Center) will be a bigger challenge, these Falcons are ready for some madness.

``We know in this tournament we're not the most athletic," Lopes said, ``but we can play as a team."

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