

Sports – Harbor Country News

Bees make narrow escape in Cassopolis

By David Johnson, News editor

CASSOPOLIS - Bridgman's season-long win streak nearly expired at the free-throw line last Tuesday evening in Cassopolis.

The host Rangers, buoyed by their frenzied fans, erased all but two points of a double-digit Bee lead in the late going, but the state's fifth-ranked Class C team held on to prevail 50-45 despite a 3-for-11 showing at the charity stripe in the fourth quarter.

"It's a very hard place to play. Their fans are very intimidating - especially when they're standing on the court during the game," said Bridgman coach Mike Miller. "I thought we came out overconfident, and we played that way throughout the game ... We need a better focus and concentration in practice right now."

It was Miller's 200th victory at Bridgman, and his players presented him with an autographed basketball after the game. Miller is in his 14th season at BHS and has nearly 400 total wins as a coach.

Nick Sweet hit a pair of first-period three-pointers and Zac Nemitz also collected an early trey as Bridgman (12-0, 8-0 Lakeland Conference) forged a 13-6 lead one period into the game. Craig McNees and Dan Kunde powered their way inside for baskets to give the Bees a 17-8 advantage as the second quarter began to unfold.

John Young sought to end the Ranger's offensive somnambulance by tallying five quick points, but Bridgman's front-court players stayed hot. Buckets by Kunde (despite a foul), McNees (out of a crowd of Cass defenders), Jon Malm and Seth Coffing (both following offensive rebounds) helped the Bees carry a 27-17 margin into the locker room at halftime.

Lonnie Williams hit a running jump shot and later a three-pointer during quarter number three, but baskets by Kunde, Sweet and McNees kept Bridgman safely ahead. P.J. Smith's three-point shot and Rodney Lewis' field goal kept the pressure on, but McNees, Kunde and Nemitz all answered the bell to leave the score 41-29 heading into the fourth quarter.

The Ranger's upset bid began quietly at the 5:05 mark of the fourth stanza when Paul Curtis drove to the hoop. Lewis then grabbed an offensive board and stuck it back in and Young went 2-for-2 at the foul line - and with 3:57 remaining in regulation, Cassopolis had closed to within five points (46-41).

Dan Ponegalek missed the front end of a 1-and-1 opportunity at the 3:44 mark, but McNees then blocked a Ranger shot.

A delay ensued as fans in the front row who were crowding the court were told to move one notch up.

During this lull in the action, the Cassopolis faithful worked themselves into a frenzy. Curtis catapulted the celebration to a whole new level when his three-point heave found nothing but net, and with 3:15 still to be played it was a two-point ballgame (46-44).

Ponegalek was back at the free-throw line eight seconds hence, and again he missed the front end of a 1-and-1, but this time he got the ball right back and cashed it in to double Bridgman's lead.

“One of my guys tipped it, and I just got it right back up and it went in,” he said. “I had to make up for missing the front end of a 1-and-1.”

As the clock ticked down toward the one-minute mark both squads experienced struggles at the charity stripe. The Rangers made 1-of-3 opportunities while the Bees went one-and-out again.

A crucial sequence ensued during which Neal Bullocks picked off a long Bridgman pass, but Cass quickly gave it right back via a carry call.

Todd Hendricks was the next Bee to face the foul-line challenge, and his 1-for-2 showing upped the lead to four points (49-45) with 29 ticks of the clock to go. As a big bonus, the missed second shot was tipped back out to Hendricks and he was quickly fouled. The junior point guard batted .500 again to give the Bees a 50-45 advantage.

And that was it as far as points were concerned. The Rangers missed a desperation three-point attempt and the last pair of Bridgman foul shots refused to fall.

Hendricks later noted that the Bees got to the foul line so many times down the stretch that some of their shots had to fall eventually. Not that he was satisfied with a 3-for-11 tally.

“We need to make more free throws down the stretch and we need to be able to put teams away,” Hendricks said.

Kunde finished with 13 points and 13 rebounds while Nemitz and McNees scored 10 points apiece.

Young led the Rangers (6-6 overall, 3-5 Lakeland) with 14 points and 11 boards. Bullocks contributed 11 points and 12 rebounds.

The Rangers finished with 14 offensive rebounds and a total of 36 while Bridgman totaled 31 boards and had 12 on the offensive end.

Cassopolis coach Josh Hood said he told his players to be excited about how much they've improved since their first game against Bridgman, but he also told them “don't be satisfied with a loss.”

“I want our kids to realize we can beat these guys now,” he added.

Bridgman's ninth-grade team toppled Cass 65-54 for its third straight victory. David Herrera poured in 27 points while Tyler Groth added 11.

The Bee JV squad edged the Rangers 47-44. Robby Clark led the way with 17 points.

Bridgman is scheduled to host Edwardsburg on Friday, Feb. 3, to visit Marshall on Tuesday, Feb. 7, and to welcome Berrien Springs to “The Hive” on Friday, Feb. 10.