

Tigers get hot hand, down Otters

03-11-21, Addison Independent, by Megan J



IVY DORAN OF Middlebury Union High School notches two points in the first quarter against the visiting Otters on Monday. The Tiger junior scored 14 on the night. Independent photo/Steve James



TIGER FORWARD ELE Sellers scores two points in the first quarter against Otter Valley Union High School on Monday. Independent photo/Steve James



OTTER VALLEY UNION High School junior Marissa Connors looks to pass the ball under the Middlebury basket as Tiger guard Cady Pitner watches in the fourth quarter of Monday's home Tiger victory. Independent photo/Steve James

MIDDLEBURY — The Middlebury Union High School girls' basketball team has done something that has been rare in recent seasons — gone on a winning streak.

On Monday, the Tigers shrugged off an eight-point first-period deficit and knocked off visiting Otter Valley, 53-32, for their third straight win. They also improved to 4-3, cresting .500 for the first time since 2018.

And they have a shot at a home Division II playoff game. The Tigers can earn at least a No. 6 seed with a home win over D-III contender Vergennes (7-1) on Thursday in the final regular season game. They could still lose and get a home game depending on other results. Playoff seeds will be released on Monday.

First-year Coach Chris Altemose said his focus for a team with no seniors has been developing skills and installing an up-tempo style that suits the Tigers' athleticism. He is happy to see the success.

"It's nice to see it coming together for them, and I know they're fired up to see a little winning streak here," Altemose said.

Meanwhile, OV dropped to 2-6 against a tough schedule. The Otters were coming off a 37-point victory over Mill River, but Coach Kelly Trayah said an ankle injury that junior guard Alice Keith suffered in that game and sophomore forward Anna Lee's lingering shoulder issue posed challenges against a Tiger team having a good night.

"They're not 100%," Trayah said. "And when they (the Tigers) are playing at the top of their game, you just tip your hat."

Still, early on it looked like the Otters' night. The Tigers took a 6-3 lead with 3:40 gone, but Trayah called for timeout midway through the period and switched from a player-to-player defense into a 2-1-2 zone.

The Tigers didn't score again in the period, and five Otters put up points. Keith was in the middle of the action, grabbing an offensive board and setting up a jumper by sophomore forward Emily Peduto, and hitting two free throws after a steal.

After one period, the Otters led, 14-6.

Both coaches acknowledged the tide turned after that: The Tigers outscored OV in the second period, 23-4, and led at the halftime break, 29-18.

"They went to that 2-1-2 zone there, and it threw us off there for a few minutes," Altemose said. "But once we got the ball moving inside and made a few shots, things started going from there for us."

Trayah said the zone ended the Tigers' effective first-period penetration into the lane, but they found the space to get shots off in the second quarter.

"They started hitting, and we went back to man. They were just hitting their shots tonight. We were doing that the other night," Trayah said. "You just go and get back to work and get ready for Springfield on Thursday."

MUHS sophomore guard Cady Pitner started the assault by nailing a jumper and a three.

Then sophomore forward Ele Sellers, the Tigers' leading scorer, took over. The Otters defended her effectively in player-to-player defense (Trayah said she was a focus of the game plan), but Sellers found room vs. the zone for seven straight points, a jumper, a three and a drive.

Keith connected on a drive in the middle of that run, but the Tigers held the lead, 18-16. And MUHS kept coming, as junior forward Hannah Turner and junior guard Ivy Doran combined for the next eight points, and the lead grew to 26-16.

Lee hit a jumper to break the spell, but MUHS junior Sophie Larocque came off the bench to complete the quarter with a free throw and a drive, and the Tiger lead stood at 11 at the break.

Keith cut the lead to single digits to open the second half, but four more points apiece from Turner and Doran helped the Tigers extend the lead to 17 after three.

They pulled away further in the fourth despite a strong night from Peduto — the sophomore showed a nice touch inside and out and scored 10 of her team-high 12 in the second half. Lee finished with eight for OV, Keith contributed six and a solid floor game, and senior guard Mia Politano added four.

Trayah hopes to use the Otters' Thursday game against Springfield to tune up for the D-III playoffs. The coach said he's also pleased the athletes were allowed to take to the court this winter.

"The seniors don't miss their season," he said. "At least they get to play. So I was happy we get to do that, that's for sure."

For the Tigers, Turner produced 14 points, nine rebounds, and four steals; Doran, 14 points and three steals; Sellers, 11 points, eight rebounds and two steals; Pitner, seven points and nine rebounds; and junior guard Fairley Olson, four points and two assists.

Altemose said he'd like to see his team play well for all 32 minutes, noting earlier in the season the team was starting strong and "struggling to finish," while now the Tigers tend to start slow and come on strong. Certainly, he said, the Tigers play their best when they dig in and play strong defense and then get out and run.

"As long as we're doing what we want to do, getting up and down the floor and getting after people defensively a little bit, then the offense tends to follow that a little bit," he said. "And I think that's what happened in the second quarter," he said.

Most importantly, Altemose said the Tigers are improving.

"We've made so many steps forward this year, so much growth and improvement. And we're always still trying to get to that position of putting it together for a full game," he said. "We're not there yet, but we're getting better."