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Sports



Lady Panthers lose in OT

- The Americus girls get into foul trouble and then watches as its season ends in overtime against Westlake, 69-61.

Paul Dehner Jr.

AMERICUS — All season, the Americus-Sumter Lady Panthers found improbable ways to snatch victories from the grasp of defeat.

In nearly every instance, the heroic final shot would come from junior Abril Peeples.

As Peeples fouled out in the final seconds of regulation Wednesday, the Lady Panthers could never top a wild comeback against Westlake with a dramatic final shot.

Then when Westlake's **Sharnea Boykin** made 12 of them in a row, Americus saw its dream season end in a 69-61 home loss in overtime.

Jayme Gilbert pulled up wide open at the top of the key and attempted a game-winning shot with five second left in regulation, but it fell short.

"We have been making those all year," Lady Panthers coach Evelyn Wright said. "Lord have mercy, I know Jayme was nervous, she is only a freshman. If she sinks that we win. It just didn't happen."

Gilbert played like a veteran however in contributing 10 points. Deatric Smith led the Lady Panthers with 16 and Jamecia McClary added 12. Peeples had nine.

Once Gilbert collected her fifth foul just seconds into the overtime period, Americus was without a starting guard and was eventually forced to foul slick point guard **Sharnea Boykin**.

The 5-foot sophomore dribbled circles around the Panthers defenders who couldn't contain her for five-second calls.

She finished with 30 points and dropped 12 consecutive free throws at the end of regulation and into overtime to pull out the win.

She even hit two which tied the game with 8.3 seconds left in the

fourth quarter to force OT.

"I was just thinking about staying focused," said Boykin. "I had to clear my mind."

It left a record-breaking season for Americus-Sumter shy of the Elite Eight.

The Lady Panthers won their first playoff game since merging schools four years ago in a opening round victory against Brunswick.

Wright left a team overflowing with emotion after a roller-coaster game in which her team fought back from a 15-2 deficit from the opening tip.

"We played hard and I couldn't ask for a better effort," Wright said.

Her team stared up at 6-foot-2 center Tamika Willis and 6-foot-1 sophomore Danielle Spencer all game.

Willis worked unabated inside whenever she had an opportunity, finishing with 24 points and 14 rebounds.

When flashing out to the elbow drawing defenders with her, she dished over the top for an easy pitch-and-catch layup with Spencer, who finished with eight points.

"It's real tough," Wright said. "But we did a good job of boxing out and made their job hard."

Only two of Willis' boards were offensive.

That became key in the final minutes when Americus trailed by eight with three minutes left. The Lady Panthers sent a raucous home crowd into a frenzy with a 9-2 run topped off with two free throws by Peeples with 18 seconds remaining.

The shots pulled to the first tie since 33-33 in the third quarter.

On the ensuing inbounds, Gilbert stole the pass and was fouled, just missing the three-point play.

She hit both, then Boykin drew Peeples' fifth foul and dropped two clutch free throws of her own to set up Gilbert's game-winning shot attempt.

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