

Story 1

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Against

the odds

Leading by two points, and with 34 seconds remaining, Sandy Valley's four players huffed and puffed. Their opponent dribbled the ball down the floor, determined to tie the game.

"Don't panic! Don't panic!" shouted their coach, Steve Putnam.

His Lady Cardinals were so close to an improbable victory. But Ridgewood was coming back big-time, and not about to give up, especially on their home court.

The overhead scoreboard read 22-20.

A basketball coach at area schools for more than two decades, Putnam used to worry as much about winning as teaching fundamentals and life lessons. But he's changed over the years. Now, he said, he's the kind of coach he'd want for his own children.

Besides, this seventh-grade Sandy Valley girls team is different. With only a 1-4 record, its success isn't measured with a win. Perhaps never, ever, has Putnam seen a team with more heart than this group, which shouldn't have a real chance of winning any game. Not with the colossal handicap it has played with most of the season.

Parents in the bleachers set aside their digital cameras to see the end of the game with their own eyes.

'PLEASE NO INJURIES'

Before the game's opening tipoff, Sandy Valley players and their coach, Putnam, huddled in a circle

on the orange and black gym floor. They go through the same ritual before practices too.

Arms extended in front of them, and hands joined in the middle, they prayed: “God is great. God is good. Thank you God for basketball, and please no injuries.”

The part about injuries is crucial for a team that began the season with six players, and now has four. That’s one less than a full team. So for this contest in mid-December, Sandy Valley was at a disadvantage — four players against Ridgewood’s five.

It was the second game in a row they played 4-on-5. The week before, the team practiced offensive and defensive plays with four players. Inside the cramped Waynesburg School gym, they scrimmaged the eighth-grade team and held their own.

“C’mon eighth-grade, we shouldn’t even be able to get a shot off; stop us,” Putnam hollered.

The four seventh-grade girls — Alyse Bowling, Kelli Mohr, Elissa Prazer and Brittany Tindall — have grown tight this season. That doesn’t diminish the role of teammate Ashley Miller, nursing a knee injury from a previous game and facing possible surgery.

Scholastic rules won’t allow a team to begin a game with fewer than five players on the floor, though there’s no rule against finishing with fewer than five.

As in the game before, wearing a left-knee brace, Ashley hobbled to the edge of the gym floor against Ridgewood to watch the tipoff. That made her technically a fifth player. Then, she promptly sat in a chair and stayed there for the rest of the game. Her teammates appreciate the effort. Ashley’s father, Randy Miller, said it may be her only role the rest of the season.

Sandy Valley’s sixth player, Taylor Henderson, is as frustrated as Ashley. Taylor hasn’t played since November when she nearly passed out during a game. Doctors haven’t cleared her to play or practice. They’re still trying to figure out if it’s related to a heart condition.

While watching a practice the week before the game, Taylor passed out. Players from the seventh- and eighth-grade teams prayed, as paramedics took her to Aultman Hospital. Now, five days later, she was at Ridgewood to support her teammates.

counting fouls

“Alyse had the flu yesterday,” her mom, Kim Bowling, told the handful of Sandy Valley parents in the bleachers.

No big deal, though. There she was in her number 11 red jersey, on the gym floor when the game started, and on the floor with her teammates, chasing loose balls during the game.

On a piece of scrap paper pressed against her purse, Kim Bowling kept track of how many fouls officials called on each Sandy Valley player. After accumulating five fouls, a player must leave the game for good. At times, the Lady Cardinals have finished games with two and three players on the court.

“Brittany hates being tall,” said her father, Jay Tindall.

She’s 5-foot-9. At times, she dominates under the basket.

But not against Ridgewood.

“Brittany, don’t foul,” Putnam shouted to her late in the first quarter, after she was called for a second foul. “You’ve already got two.”

Moments later, Brittany dribbled the length of the floor, and tossed in a 4-foot jump shot off the backboard to give Sandy Valley an early 4-2 lead. That increased to 6-2 by the end of the first quarter.

The eighth-grade team, waiting to play the second game of this doubleheader, sat on bleachers behind the seventh-graders, cheering: “Give me a ‘C’ ... give me an ‘A’ ... give me an ‘R’ ... they chanted. All of them wore red t-shirts emblazoned with the phrase: “No pain ... No gain; No guts ... No glory; No blood ... No foul; Sandy Valley Lady Cards basketball.”

Needed rest

It’s hard to believe it’s tough keeping names straight with only four players on the floor. But when it comes to basketball, Elissa Prazer’s name is “Eli,” so she’s not confused with Alyse.

Although the girls came from different elementary schools, they played together last year as sixth-graders. Eli and Kelli, from St. James Elementary in Waynesburg, are best friends. Both work in dancing at Susan Powell studio in Minerva around basketball. They also are the team’s best dribblers and ballhandlers.

Leading 9-4 early in the second quarter, Brittany took an elbow to the head. “Brit, you OK?” Putnam asked as she backpedaled on defense. “You need a timeout?”

She shook her head ‘no.’

Each team gets five timeouts per game. While most coaches call them to draw up plays or set a defense, Putnam saves several for the fourth quarter to rest the girls.

“I don’t know anything about sports,” confessed Tina Prazer, as she cheered on her daughter, Eli. “People ask me what kind of sports I like; I tell them the ones my kids play.”

By halftime, Sandy Valley built an 11-4 lead.

“Rest up girls,” hollered Jay Tindall, as the 12-and-13-year-old girls ran to the locker room.

Tired but not panicked

The Lady Cardinals stretched their lead in the third quarter.

“Watch where you’re starting your shot 11,” Kim Bowling hollered at her daughter, Alyse. In the bleachers, Bowling lowered her right hand to her waist and turned to explain to parent Michelle Tindall. “When she’s tired, she starts releasing it down here.”

Eli banked in a three-pointer with 1:24 to play in the third, bumping the lead to 18-6. But in the next minute, Ridgewood scored eight unanswered points to cut it to 18-14 at the end of the third quarter.

Ridgewood continued its comeback in the fourth, slicing the margin to 20-18 with 2:06 to play. Putnam called a timeout. Sandy Valley’s parents sat mostly silent, while a few dozen Ridgewood fans roared.

“They’re tired ... they’re just tired,” muttered Jay Tindall.

As they emerged from the timeout, he shouted.

“You guys aren’t tired. Let’s do it!”

“Don’t panic, Eli!” Putnam yelled.

With 22 seconds to play, Ridgewood missed a shot, and Sandy Valley got the ball back. A free throw by Kelli Mohr with 14 seconds remaining, gave the Lady Cardinals a 23-20 lead.

In the waning seconds, Ridgewood had two attempts to cut into the lead or tie the game. But one shot missed the mark, and the buzzer sounded before they could shoot a desperation three-

pointer.

Final score: Sandy Valley 23, Ridgewood 20.

“They played from the beginning, and we didn’t,” said Ridgewood coach Tina Smith, whose team dropped to 2-3. “I give them all the credit. They are all heart.”

Sandy Valley’s four healthy and two injured players didn’t jump for joy. They didn’t trade high-fives. They filed on the floor to congratulate their opponent, then headed to the locker room.

“We don’t celebrate on the floor,” Putnam said.

That shows a lack of class.

Inside the locker room, the team celebrated in its own special way. Gathered in a circle, they extended their right feet in to the center, then in unison pulled them out, like the hokeypokey. They kicked backward, each of their red and white Nikes striking the posteriors of a teammate.

“We kick butt!” they yelled.