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Raiders Punch Ticket To NJCAA Tournament

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POPLAR BLUFF - Just three days after battling wire-to-wire with Moberly to win the Region XVI championship, Tuesday night's District 4 championship game against Highland was almost anticlimactic for the Three Rivers Raiders.

Three Rivers scored 19 straight points in the first half to wipe out an early deficit and were never seriously challenged as they continued their improbable postseason run, rolling to a 103-79 victory over the Cougars to win the district title and a trip to the NJCAA Tournament in Hutchinson, Kan.

"Our season has been a roller-coaster – up and down," Three Rivers sophomore Bobby Peebles said. "But we know at the end if you win, you keep playing. If you lose, you go home. We came together as a team and we all decided that we wanted to go to Hutch."

Said Three Rivers coach Gene Bess: "I'm a believer and I know one thing for sure – God is in control. This has been a fabulous thing to happen to this coach."

Tuesday's win was all the more amazing considering the fact that Highland (26-8) handed the Raiders a 92-75 defeat 15 days earlier in Freeport, Ill. to cap a three-game losing streak to end the regular season.

"My wife calls it miraculous," said Bess, "but we came home and practiced for 10 days. We had a 10-day layoff – that was enough to blow you away – but we actually adapted to the situation and had some of the best practices of the year. The kids were pretty humbled

by those three bad losses that we had and they came together during that 10-day stretch.”

After that game, many were expecting a close contest in the rematch, but Three Rivers (21-12) made sure that never happened.

Three Rivers trailed 7-5 after Jeremy Parker’s bucket just over two minutes into the game, but back-to-back baskets by Bobby Peebles put the Raiders up 9-7 at the 16:46 mark of the first half and ignited a 19-0 run that ended on Terrance Glass’ 3-pointer with 12:53 left in the opening session and a 24-7 lead.

Three Rivers led 41-19 after Ignas Palaima’s free throw with 3:09 left before the break, but the Cougars used a 7-0 run spread over both halves to cut the gap to 47-35 on Joseph Danforth’s basket with 19:29 left in the game.

“We jumped out and got a good start on them but they didn’t go away,” Bess said. “They’re a good team and they can score a lot of points in a hurry.”

However, the Raiders slowly began to pull away from there, getting the lead back to 20 points (71-51) on Glass’ bucket with 11:34 to go and never looking back the rest of the way.

Peebles led Three Rivers with 24 points, while Elgin “Eli” Lee added 17, Tarius Johnson chipped in 15, Glass tossed in 14, Rudy Harrell put in 13 and Palaima finished with 10.

Danforth paced Highland with 18 points, while Samuel Ford added 12 and the duo of Demetrius Tolliver and Aaron Nelson contributed 11 apiece.

The Raiders will open play at the NJCAA Tournament next Tuesday when they face Spartanburg Methodist. Tipoff at the Hutchinson Sports Arena is set for 4:30 p.m.

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