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Time to Start Believing: Hawks to National Tournament

LUBBOCK — From worst to first.

It took four years, but the Howard College women's basketball team climbed the ladder out of the cellar and have finally reached the top of its region.

The Hawks defeated Odessa College's Lady Wranglers Tuesday, 78-53, claiming the Region V championship and advancing to the NJCAA National Tournament in Salina, Kan.

"It's really inspirational," said Howard Head Coach Earl Diddle. "These girls have a lot of emotion. They're always hopping around. They're great. They deserve this. I thought we were always a pretty good team. We went through a part of the season where we were sick and injured, but they really came back. They played with no fear today. They believed they could win this. I'm very proud for this school. I'm very proud of our kids."

It was a back-and-forth battle in the first half with Odessa taking a 25-24 advantage into the break, courtesy of two Diandra Marquez free throws with no time left on the clock.

Howard finally started to separate with 14:58 left to play in the game. DeAndra Thomas hit back-to-back buckets, drawing a foul on the second one and converting the 3-point play. Thomas' five consecutive points gave the Hawks a 36-32 advantage.

Patricia Malouff followed with a 3-pointer, forcing Odessa to take a time out down 39-32 with 13:23 on the clock.

The break in play worked for only a moment, though. Up 41-36, The Hawks embarked on a 13-5 run, pushing their lead to double figures, 54-41.

Rachael Dryver initiated the rally, hitting from inside the lane, then Chassidy Cole hit her second 3-pointer of the night with 11:21 to play, giving Howard a 46-36 advantage.

A field goal by Marquez was immediately answered by a long 2-point bucket by Thomas. Malouff then caught fire from behind the arch.

Her second three of the half was answered by a trey by Telisha Joe, but Malouff immediately responded with another long-range bucket, giving the Hawks the 13-point advantage with 8:32 to play.

Eleven of Howard's final 24 points came from the free throw line as the Hawks steadily pushed their lead over the 20-point margin.

Dryver led all scorers with her most productive performance in her two years as a Hawks, posting 22 points while pulling down a team-high eight rebounds.

Malouff scored all 15 of her points in the second half. Thomas also finished with 15, knocking down 7 of 11 field goal attempts. She missed just one shot in the second half as the sophomore post proved she could sink a long-range jumper as well as score in the paint.

"I was ready. I wanted this so bad," said Thomas. "It's my last year at Howard and I wanted everyone to know we can do it. We weren't supposed to make it and now we're on our way to Kansas."

Howard shot just 34.5 percent in the first half, but improved to 54.8 percent in the second. Odessa was good for only 38.5 percent of its shots and turned the ball over 19 times, compared to a mere 10 for the Hawks.

Diddle attributed the improved performance in the second half to the team getting over the first half jitters.

"We relaxed a little bit. We were all a little nervous," said Diddle. "Our defense got better. We sealed the basket. It was all good stuff."

The Hawks now wait to be seeded among the 15 other teams who qualified for the national tournament. It is played in a double-elimination format and begins Tuesday.

Time for Howard's opening game will be known once seeds are announced. The Hawks could play as early as 10 a.m. or as late as 8:15 p.m. Tuesday. They could also potentially play their first game at either noon or 2 p.m. Wednesday.

"We have to continue to survive and advance," said Diddle. "I don't know how far we can go, but the first thing is to believe you can do it. When we get up there, it will be the best 16 teams in the country. We're going to take a day off. I'm going to Albuquerque to recruit and watch the (New Mexico) state tournament. Then, we're going to get back on the practice floor Friday. These girls are not done playing yet. That's always a great thing. It's exciting."

While Diddle isn't ready to make any predictions, Thomas and the rest of the players are setting their sights on the highest possible prize.

"I think we can go out and get that national championship," said Thomas with confidence. "I feel it."

**Howard College 78,
Odessa College 53**

OC (22-11)

Priscilla Mbiandja 6-12 4-5 16, Shon Redmond 3-8 2-2 8, Diandra Marquez 2-8 2-2 7, Brittany Pennell 1-7 0-0 2, Tammie Thornton 1-3 1-2 3, Judith Tabala 1-1 0-0 2, Telisha Joe 2-4 0-0 5, Keisha Harris 2-3 1-1 6, Tamika Johnson 2-6 0-0 4. Totals 20-52 10-12 53.

HC (26-7)

DeAndra Thomas 7-11 1-1 15, Chassidy Cole 2-8 0-0 6, Rachael Dryver 8-12 6-6 22, Patricia Malouff 4-8 4-6 15, Miesha Blackshear 3-9 3-7 9, NaTalia Smith 0-2 3-4 3, Danielle Cota 0-2 0-0 0, Clarissa Krum 3-8 0-0 8. Totals 27-60 17-24 78.

Halftime: OC 25, HC 24. 3-point goals: OC 3-13 (Harris 1-1, Joe 1-2, Marquez 1-6, Mbiandja 0-1, Johnson 0-1, Pennell 0-2), HC 7-17 (Malouff 3-4, Cole 2-6, Krum 2-7). Rebounds: OC 35 (Mbiandja 9), HC 38 (Dryver 8). Assists: OC 12 (Redmond 5), HC 18 (Blackshear 5, Cole 5, Dryver 5). Steals: OC 6 (Redmond 2, Pennell 2), HC 10 (Blackshear 5). Turnovers: OC 19, HC 10. Total fouls: OC 16, HC 11. Fouled out: None.