

Boys

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worst when we play here. But we just dug deep and figured out how to get this [regional] championship done. Now, we got to go on to the state championship. We'll be ready, I can promise you that."

Gwyn, who has emerged as a prime-time scorer in recent weeks, failed to reach double digits and finished with nine points. Even though he shot blanks in the first half, he compensated nicely with three 3s in the second half, which included the game winner.

With the score tied at 60 and just under 12 seconds left to play, Gwyn took a pass from Justice Goodloe and promptly buried the decisive shot from 28 feet out.

"I knew it was good as soon as it left my hand," said Gwyn, who has played on three national-championship teams with the CP3 All-Stars. "I try to keep myself prepared to take the shot in a big game like this."

During a time-out in the closing seconds, Gould drew up a play that gave his team three scoring options. The first choice was to get the ball inside to Zaire Williams, who had ruled the paint all game long. If Williams wasn't open, Goodloe had the green light to attack the basket, or drive the lane and make a kick-out pass to Gwyn.

As the play unfolded, Goodloe noticed that Williams was well-covered. But he also realized that Gwyn had enough space on the right wing to receive his pass and take the shot.

"We had Zaire down on the low block, so they had to pick their poison," said Gould. "They didn't know if it was going to be Zaire on the inside, or Justice turning the corner, or Chaz sliding away [to an open area]. We wanted to put No. 11 [Lavonte Knox] in a position where he had to make a tough decision."

Prep's defense and scoring balance helped set the stage for the comeback. Williams finished with 18 points and 12 rebounds and Daivien Williamson added

12 points. Goodloe contributed 11 points and five assists.

Kendrick Edwards came off the bench to deliver huge boost at both ends of the floor. Edwards had nine points and six boards. But equally important was his perimeter defense.

The Phoenix trailed 29-20 at the half, and appeared to be in trouble. Edwards led an intense defensive effort that helped Prep gain some much-needed momentum. By the end of the third quarter, the game was tied at 44.

"Kendrick has done that for us all year," said Gould. "But we do have others who have come through for us on different nights. We just figure out how to survive and advance."

Aside from defense, Prep got back in contention thanks to a solid effort on the boards. The Phoenix held a huge rebounding advantage (38-23). On the other hand, woeful free-throw shooting (8-for-23) could come back to haunt Gould's team.

"We can't afford to miss so many foul shots," said Gould. "If we wind up missing 15 free throws in the championship game, we are going to lose. At this stage of the season, you have to take advantage of everything."

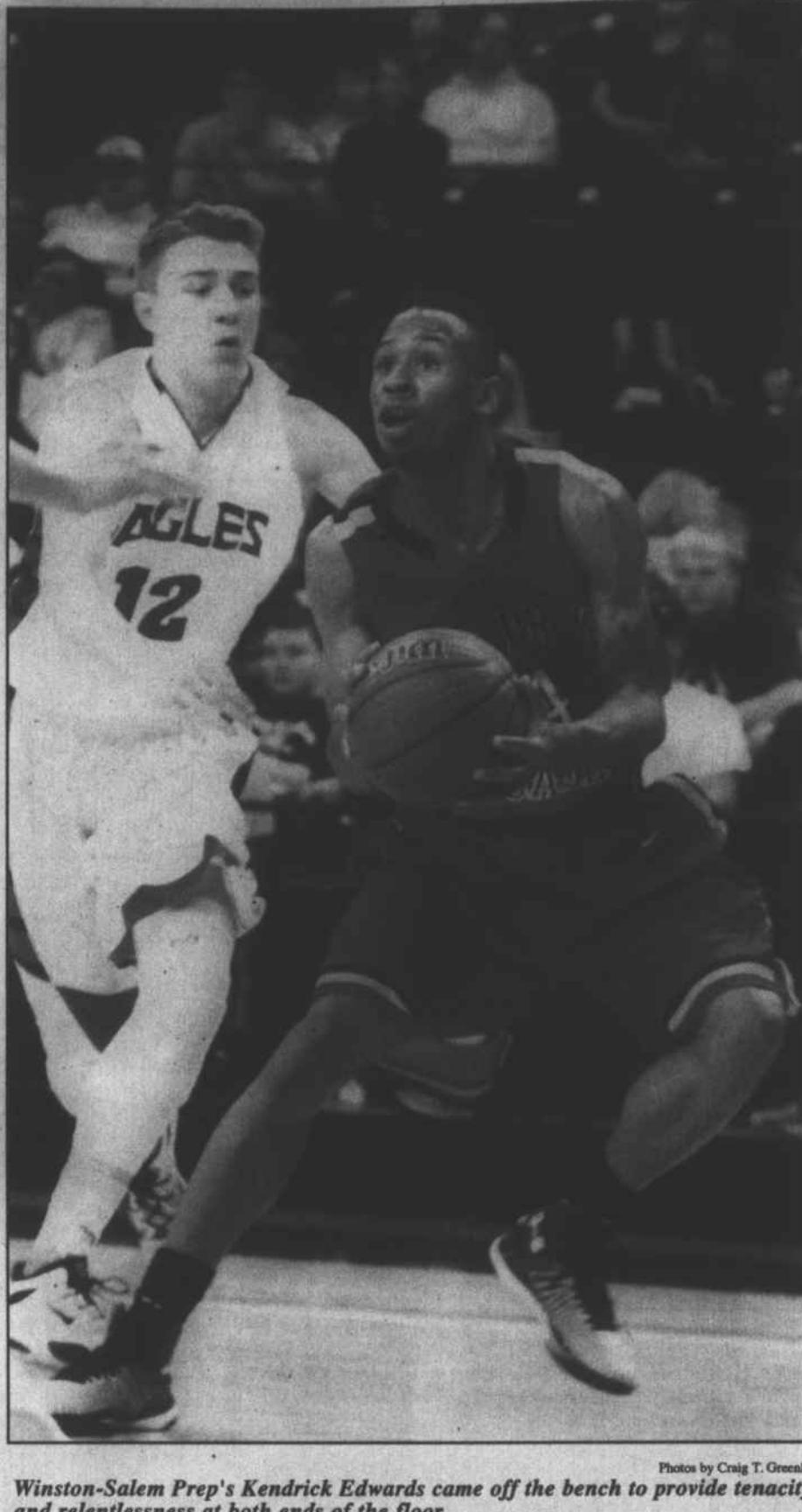
Lincoln Charter (29-4) entered the regional final as a virtual scoring machine. The Eagles had averaged 89.7 points through the first four games of the state playoffs. Koby Shubert and Knox combined to score 19 of Lincoln Charter's 29 first-half points.

Shubert delivered a game-high 19 points in defeat. Knox added 16 points and Logan Foster scored 10.

"We knew that Prep would come out in the second half and go to 11 [Williams]," said coach Bradley Gabriel of Lincoln Charter. "But we didn't know that 14 [Gwyn] was going to have a career night in the second half. The kid hit a very tough shot at the very end. So, you just have to tip your hat to them. This game was a testament to just how good these two teams are."



This year marks the fifth straight season that Coach Andre Gould has led Winston-Salem Prep to the Class 1-A state championship game.



Photos by Craig T. Greenlee

Winston-Salem Prep's Kendrick Edwards came off the bench to provide tenacity and relentless at both ends of the floor.

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In the regional title game, Atkins controlled the tempo early, primarily because of its willingness to attack the basket. The Camels went up 14-12 at the end of the first quarter. But after that, Prep eventually got in sync and pulled ahead in the closing minutes of the first half to take a 29-24 lead at intermission.

The Phoenix held steady in spite of point guard Jada Craig's foul problems. Craig, the team's floor leader and top scorer, was whistled for her fourth foul with 1:19 remaining in the third quarter. She fouled out in the fourth quarter and finished with four points.

Even though Craig was forced to sit and watch, Prep (27-3) was able to add to its four-point lead. Christina Caesar had a three-point play and Kristian Saunders scored inside to push the lead to 42-34 at the end of the third quarter.

"We preach team," said Love. "And on this team, we have seven other very talented kids. Any one of them can go big at any time. So you can't key on just one person (to stop). Tonight, it was Christina's and (Mychala) Wolfe's time to step up."

Caesar shot 50 percent from the field and scored a game-high 16 points.

Wolfe (13 points) provided timely outside shooting and hit four 3-pointers in the process. Dominique Clayton turned in a solid performance at both ends of the court with eight points, five rebounds, three assists and two steals.

"The key for me was being able to keep up with who I was guarding and not get into foul trouble," said Wolf, who shot 67 percent from 3-point distance. "Offensively, I just had to focus on my shot and not rush it."

In the fourth quarter, Prep spread the floor to take time off the clock, which forced Atkins to foul. The Phoenix closed the game out to win by hitting 11-of-14 free throws in the second half. It was a much different performance than the first half when it went 0-for-7 from the foul line.

The seeds for Prep's championship run were sown two years ago when the Phoenix lost to Bishop McGuinness (49-46) in the semifinals of the Class 1-A West Regionals. McGuinness went on to capture its ninth straight state championship.

The memory of that defeat lingered in the players' minds, but it also served as a powerful motivational tool for the following season.

"That game (loss to McGuinness) stayed with us," said Caesar. "On that day, they were not better

than us. We did a lot of crazy things that we shouldn't have done. After that game, we just kept moving forward."

Atkins (21-7) had high expectations for this contest and for good reason. Over the two previous seasons, the Camels split two regular-season games with Prep. This season, they lost both games by an average margin of four points.

"It's very disappointing because we feel like we could've played much better," said coach Louis Lowery of Atkins. "We've always played them close, but close is only good in horseshoes. The main thing is that defensively, we didn't do our job. We take pride in keeping teams in the 30s and 40s."

Up until last Saturday, the Camels played at a superlative level in the postseason. Although they finished No. 2 behind Prep in the ultra-competitive Northwest 1-A Conference, they were seeded 12th in the West Region. The low seeding didn't matter. Atkins pulled off consecutive upsets of No. 4 Elkin and No. 1 seed Hiwassee Dam to advance to the regional final.

Power forward Saryna Carpenter finished her high school career at Atkins with a double-double (13 points and 11 rebounds). Fellow seniors Tyler Mercer scored 13 points and Tyler Davenport added 10.



Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Kayla Robinson (23) has developed as one of Winston-Salem Prep's most versatile players.

Camels

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numbing because of the road the Camels traveled to qualify for the regional final.

The confidence level of this team soared to new heights after Atkins knocked off the West Region's No. 1 seed (Hiwassee Dam) on its home floor. The way the game vs. Prep turned out, though, was far from what the Camels had envisioned.

Although Atkins and Prep had never faced off in the playoffs, the Camels proved they could more than hold their own in previously played regular-season match-ups. But that's not what transpired in the regional championship game.

The Camels had a sub-par day all across the board. As a team, they shot 26.2 percent from the field for the game. The usually stout defense, which typically forces opponents to shoot a low percentage, wasn't what it needed to be in this high stakes contest. Prep shot 50 percent from the field.

"Our defense wasn't as sharp as it normally is," said Lowery. "As the coach, I take the responsibility for that.

Our (defensive) rotations just weren't that good today. What really hurt us is that they were able to get the ball to places where we normally don't allow teams to get the ball."

One of the keys to Atkins downfall was the absence of production from Armani Hampton, a senior forward who has signed to play at Appalachian State. Hampton averaged over 15 points a game for her career. But last weekend she finished with one point and had just one field goal attempt for the entire game. Hampton, who fouled out in the fourth quarter, had four rebounds.

"That was surprising to me," said Lowery. "We were actually trying to get the ball in to her. That was a big difference for us. Normally, we have three people (to score) in double figures. We did that today. But if she had been able to score more, it would've given us four players (in double figures) and that would have put us way over the hump."

Tyler Mercer turned in the best individual performance for Atkins. The senior point guard had 13 points, which included three 3-pointers. Mercer's offensive aggressiveness enabled her team to stay in contention for a good portion of the game.

"I just tried to take advantage of what they were doing

defensively," said Mercer. "Whether it was taking the open shot or attacking the basket, I just wanted to do everything I could to help my team out."

Atkins loses six seniors off this season's history-making crew. It remains to be seen whether the Camels will have to rebuild or reload for next season. The key returning players includes sophomore forward Taylor Blakely and post player Kayla Chrisp. Departing senior Saryna Carpenter has no doubts that girls basketball at Atkins will continue to grow and flourish.

"With the season we had, it definitely gives the younger players confidence for the future," said Carpenter who scored 13 points and pulled down 11 rebounds against Prep. "They've seen for themselves that we can do it (compete with the best teams in the state). We were able to set the bar higher and higher every year."

Lowery paid homage to the Camels' senior class – Hampton, Carpenter, Davenport, Mercer, Chandler Robinson and Mikalah Muhammad – who were key figures in the girls' basketball program rising to prominence.

"Those six were very instrumental in the turnaround at Atkins," said Lowery. "They were the main contributors who helped to put us on the map. I've had them for four years and I thank God that they're in my life."