

## **Girls' basketball: G-D upsets Notre Dame in instant classic**

*By Sam Feeley*

WORCESTER – The Groton-Dunstable Crusaders erased a 10-point third quarter deficit and defeated the Notre Dame Rebels, 59-57, in an MIAA Division 2 Central girls' basketball semifinal game Sunday at WPI.

After being held to just seven points in the first three quarters, Crusaders senior guard Lindsay Werner came alive with eight in the final session, including a layup with 2:30 to go that gave the Crusaders a 56-55 lead they would not relinquish, and their first lead since 2-0 in the first quarter.

In a last-ditch effort, Rebels center Allie Smiley (24 points, eight rebounds) managed to get to the line with 2.6 seconds left, but she missed both free throws, part of an 0-for-5 dry spell in the fourth quarter, and Werner secured the rebound before getting fouled, leading to an outburst of excitement from her and her teammates.

But it was not over yet. Werner still had to go to the line for a 1-and-1. She missed the front end, allowing the Rebels to get the rebound, but they hesitated to get a shot off, and time expired before they could get any kind of look at the basket.

"It's one of the best experiences I've ever had as a coach, without question," Crusaders head coach Mark Hennelly said. "It's just about the growth of the team. I can't even put into words how different this team looks from three weeks ago when we went up to Oakmont and got our butts kicked. We played with no passion and no energy. It was a turning point for us. We came back, and they turned the corner. I was all over them, and they could have shut me out, but they responded in a big way."

The Crusaders put themselves in position to make the comeback at the end of the third quarter, when Nikki Eggiman (10 points, two steals) stole an inbounds pass with 1.6 left and hit a layup as time expired to cut the deficit to five points.

"You can't put a price on that," Hennelly said. "Nikki gave every ounce of energy she had... her effort was something special."

As the Crusaders marched towards victory, Hennelly, a man who shows the same energy and desire to win as his players, urged his girls to keep up the effort.

"He just said, 'Keep fighting, keep fighting,'" Werner said. "Even if we're up, keep fighting, because we know they're a good team that could possibly come back, but we held our own."

"There was no point in the game where they had a look on their face like 'We're done,'" Hennelly said. "There was always fight left in them. Ten points in a girls' basketball game? You never know."

Sophomore forward Hannah Van Pelt had another double-double for the Crusaders (15 points, 12 rebounds), despite fouling out late in the fourth quarter. Freshman Ellie Eisenklam had nine points, eight rebounds, two steals and two assists in her first career start. Jenna Plausse added four points and eight rebounds.

Throughout the first half, the Crusaders were settling for contested threes and getting themselves into foul trouble. Werner picked up three fouls in the first half and was walking the tightrope for much of the second half after being called for her fourth foul midway through the third quarter.

“I know I was [settling for threes],” Werner said. “We were taking a lot of jump shots in general.

When we were hitting threes, it was because we were going inside, then outside.”

“We never thought we were out of it,” Van Pelt said. “We never lost energy.”

Smiley wasn't the only Rebels player to have a tremendous game. Molly Terry, whom Hennelly lauded as one of the best guards in Central Massachusetts, had 23 points, six rebounds, five assists and four steals.

The Crusaders (16-6) will return to WPI Saturday at 12:45 p.m. to face no. 4 Medfield in the sectional final. The Warriors stunned top seed and previously unbeaten Nashoba 60-34 in the other semifinal.