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McNary shocks West Salem in MVC thriller

By MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

Similar to every team the McNary boys basketball team has faced this year, West Salem had a difficult time defending Nate Meithof. The Celtics star shooting guard torched the Titans for 35 points on 13-of-16 shooting.

However, the heroics down the stretch for McNary came from an unexpected source.

Kyler Rodriguez — who swung time between JV and varsity at the beginning of the season — came off the bench to score 16 points, including a game-winning 3-pointer, which was banked in off the backboard with eight seconds remaining, as the Celtics erased a 17-point second half deficit to beat West Salem 64-63 in the Mountain Valley Conference opener on Friday, Jan. 17.

"I thought the ball was going to be stolen on the pass, but it was tipped straight into my hands. I'm just lucky that I was able to call bank on that shot," Rodriguez said with a smile.

Just a couple of weeks prior, Rodriguez was not consistently involved in McNary's rotation. But with his performances in the last two games, the sophomore guard has proved himself to be a reliable secondary scorer.

"He has really taken that next step. He isn't afraid to make mistakes and he has really matured and has become a significant role player for us. I think tonight was a significant stepping stone to see where he could go and we just expect him to keep on growing," McNary head coach Ryan Kirch said.

As the game was underway, it became clear how focused West Salem was in trying to slow down Meithof.

Not only was he face-guarded for much of the game, but many times when Meithof touched the ball, an additional two defenders would swarm to him.

Despite the game-plan, Meithof was able to shake himself loose for a trio of tough buckets in the opening period, giving the Celtics a 13-12 lead.

However, things began to unravel moments later for McNary.

Late in the first quarter, McNary's starting point guard Jando Gonzalez had to leave the game after hitting the floor hard. Then in the second quarter, Kirch got hit

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KEIZERTIMES/Matt Rawlings
McNary point guard Jando Gonzalez breaks away from the West Salem defense in transition for an easy lay-up. The Celtics erased a 17-point second half deficit to defeat the Titans 64-63.

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LEFT: McNary students storm the court after their team completed the comeback victory. RIGHT: Nate Meithof torched the Titans for 35 points on 13-of-16 shooting,

Shorthanded Celts fall to West Salem in league opener

KEIZERTIMES/Matt Rawlings
McNary forward Annie-Leigh Besa goes up for a shot after receiving the ball in the post. Besa led the Celtics with 14 points, but McNary still fell to West Salem 61-45 on friday, Jan. 17.

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The McNary girls basketball squad nearly played even with West Salem in the final three quarters. But the Celtics couldn't overcome the hole they dug themselves into in the opening period.

The Titans started the first quarter on a 20-5 run and McNary couldn't get the game back into single digits as the Celtics fell to West Salem 61-45 in their Mountain Valley Conference opener on Friday, Jan. 17.

> "There were a lot of things we were kicking ourselves about in the first half."
>
> — Elizabeth Doran, McNary head coach

McNary was without their starting point guard, Leah Doutt, who was battling an illness all week.

Without their top ball-handler, the Celtics struggled in dealing with West Salem's half-court trap, which led to several turnovers for McNary.

"Not having Leah there was definitely difficult. She usually takes a lot of that pressure off with the full-court press," McNary forward Annie-Leigh Besa said.

The Celtics also gave up numerous easy baskets to West Salem after suffering several defensive breakdowns in the first half.

"There were a lot of things we were kicking ourselves about in the first half," McNary head coach Elizabeth Doran said. "We struggled with leaving the weak side open when we were double-teaming their guards and our transition defense wasn't great. We made progress, but we need to adjust quicker in games to what is going on."

McNary found themselves trailing at the half 39-21. One of the only bright spots in the first half for McNary was Besa, who scored eight points off the bench in the first 16 minutes — she would finish the game with a team-high 14 points.

"I knew we needed something to get us going. At that point, there was nothing to lose, so I was just playing with confidence in myself," Besa said.

The Celtics cut into the lead at the start of the third quarter when Kylie Nepstad and Kenzie Proctor hit back-to-back triples to trim the lead to 14. Kendyl Jennings, who had 10 points on the night, also got involved in the scoring action.

But West Salem responded by going on an 11-2 run to end the quarter, which gave them a 54-31 advantage.

Despite the score being out of reach, McNary had some positives to build on in the final period, including their defense stepping up and holding the Titans to just seven points in the fourth quarter.

"That was something that we were praised on in the locker room even though we fell short," Besa said.

McNary travels to Bend on Saturday, Jan. 25 for a 2:30 p.m. game. The Celtics will return home on Thursday, Jan. 30 for a 5:45 p.m. matchup with Sprague.