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McNary picks up big win at South Salem



McNARY
HOOPS

McNary forward Carson Long prepares to make a pass in traffic. Photo by MATT RAWLINGS of Keizertimes

BY MATT RAWLINGS Of the Keizertimes

"It certainly wasn't pretty," McNary boys' basketball coach Ryan Kirch said about his team's performance against South Salem, but the Celtics did enough to get the job done on the road.

Trailing by three midway through the third quarter, McNary finished the period on a 12-0 run and never looked back, defeating the Saxons 54-42 on Friday, Jan. 28.

Jando Gonzalez had a game-high 14 points, all of which came in the second half, for the Celtics and Gunner Smedema added 11 points in the win.

"Since league play has started and we've been at full strength, we have gotten better every single game. We have really guarded well over the last couple weeks," Kirch said. "We had some struggles with handling pressure and making shots at times, but I'm proud of our guys. It was an ugly win. But a win is a win."

Since the creation of the Mountain Valley Conference (MVC) in 2018, McNary is the only team to defeat South Salem multiple times in their home gym — the Celtics beat the second-ranked Saxons in 2019.

"They have been a rival for us the last few years, so coming out with a win was really important to us," Gonzalez said.

"We made it our court tonight," McNary forward Carson Long added.

McNary jumped out to an 8-2 advantage in the first quarter after Smedema and Tyler Copeland each scored a pair of hoops in the first three minutes. The Celtics went through a five-minute scoreless drought, allowing South Salem to go on a 9-0 run to gain the lead, but a key 3-pointer from Long helped the Celtics regain the momentum.

After getting a stop on the defensive end, Copeland found Long moving up the floor with an outlet pass with less than five seconds left in the quarter.

Despite not being a perimeter player, Long gathered and shot the ball with confidence from the baseline, finding nothing but the bottom of the net when the buzzer sounded, tying the game at 11.

"It was a confidence booster, knowing that my teammates trusted me to take those shots," Long said. "It brought our energy up."

The other factor that allowed McNary to get out of their offensive funk was the play of Jabol Balos-Mesey off the bench.

Using his speed and athleticism,

Balos-Mesey got to the rim on three consecutive possessions to score six straight points, allowing the Celtics to keep pace.

"He was a great spark tonight off the bench. He can go by people as good as anyone you'll see. With our personnel, he's able to do stuff that other guys can't. In both halves, his impact changed the course of the game because it distorted their defense and changed how they guard. Those were big minutes he gave us tonight," Kirch said.

A triple from Brody Roth put McNary on top late in the second quarter. The

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