

# PG North: North Catholic survives shaky free-throw shooting to retain WPIAL championship, advance to PIAA tournament

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By Nicholas Tolomeo, Tri-State Sports & News Service

As North Catholic's free throws were rolling off the rim, hitting the side of the rim and doing anything but going in, coach Dave Long had visions of Penn State's Bryce Jordan Center.

It was odd he was thinking of the site of the PIAA title games, considering the way his team was shooting. Those visions were not about this coming year's PIAA championships but last year's when the Trojans free throw woes cost them a PIAA title.

"I was having visions of last year's state title game," Long said. "We had that game a lot like I felt we had it on Saturday. I was thinking I will be putting a silver medal in my pocket, not a gold."

With his team clinging to a 51-46 lead against Rochester Saturday afternoon at Duquesne University's Palumbo Center, the Trojans missed the front end of three one-and-ones in the final 30 seconds.

Last season four missed free throws late in the game denied North Catholic a chance for its first PIAA title. This time though, with the WPIAL title on the line, the Trojans (23-2) overcame the cold shooting and held on for a 51-48 win against Rochester ... and Long was, indeed, putting a gold medal in his pocket for the second consecutive year.

The Trojans will play Westmont Hilltop (15-12) in the first round of the PIAA tournament 3:30 p.m. Saturday at North Allegheny High School.

With another 51-point performance at the A.J. Palumbo Center, 51 may be the Trojans' new lucky number. Last season, they captured WPIAL gold with a 51-44 win against Jeannette.

Yet if you ask Long what was most important, he will tell you it was Rochester's 48 points. The Rams had been averaging 69.5 points per game, the highest in Class AA in the WPIAL.

"I think the biggest thing was that we were able to keep a high-scoring team well below its season average," Long said. "If [the Rams] would have stayed on the pace they had been on all season, 51 points would not have been enough."

The championship repeat was done with only two starters back from last season, senior forward Jesse Long and his cousin, junior point guard Martin Long. Both are Dave Long's nephews.

The Trojans graduated three starters from last season's team -- Joe Long, Matt Long and Henry Pwono -- but Dave Long gives a lot of credit to those three for helping the team get to where it is.

"Henry, Joe and Matt are still having a huge impact on our program," Dave Long said.



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

North Catholic High School seniors hoist the WPIAL Class AA trophy after defeating Rochester, 51-48, to win the school's second consecutive WPIAL title.

"Everyday last year guys like Ryan Lewis, Tyler Staniski and Kory Gribbin had to go up against Henry, Joe and Matt. I think that is one of the reasons why we are seeing a Ryan Lewis, who can go into a big game with Rochester and hold it down in the post offensively and defensively."

The win on the basketball court also served as redemption for most of the players on the Trojans roster.

Senior forward Christian Wolosik, a first-year starter, was denied a chance for a WPIAL title on the baseball field when he was the losing pitcher against Shady Side Academy in May 2009. Wolosik redeemed himself with a monster day, 20 points and 13 rebounds, against Rochester.

For the players who also play football, it was a shot at redemption against the Rams, the team that stopped them just short of a trip to Heinz Field to play for the WPIAL Class A title.

"I am sure the football players who came so close to beating them, I think they gathered some extra satisfaction with the win," Dave Long said.

The season North Catholic put together impressed at least one area team. In one of the biggest compliments a Class AA team can get, the Trojans got it with a phone call from Mt. Lebanon coach Joe David, the coach of the Class AAAA champion Blue Devils. He called to ask if the Trojans wanted to scrimmage on Tuesday as each team prepares for the PIAA tournament.

"We get an opportunity to go head to head with Mt. Lebanon," Dave Long said.

"They recognized that we are one of the most competitive teams in the WPIAL, regardless of classification. That is gratifying for me."