

Team Balance Key To Owls' Triumph At Boston Garden

By PAT BOLDUC

The tipoff that Hartford High's racy and well balanced basketball quintet had an excellent chance to dethrone defending champion Wilbur Cross in the 36th annual New England interscholastic tournament at the Boston Garden last week came in the final two minutes of the third period of the Owls' opening test against Western Massachusetts titlist Smith Academy of Hatfield.

Coach Joe Kubachka's successful club was tight and very tense in the opening quarter, missing its last four foul shots while erecting a shaky 10-7 margin. The Owls seemingly could not shake the jitters which befell them in the Connecticut finale against Cross. Hartford failed to impress in the second quarter against previously undefeated Smith although increasing its advantage to 28-19 at halftime.

Then nursing a slim 37-33 edge with six minutes gone in the third period the Owls abandoned their 3-2 zone defense in favor of a full court press, and with sharpshooting Ed Griffin scoring five straight points the Owls were over their stage fright, and Smith, which had racked up 22 wins in a row, was a soundly beaten club when the final buzzer sounded.

Size Helped Cheverus

Cheverus High of Portland, Maine had racked up 20 victories in 24 games before drawing the assignment of stopping the hot Owls in the first of two semi-final games last Friday. Only its size (four starters stood 6-2 or better) helped keep the Maine champions in the opening quarter which ended 14-13 in favor of Hartford.

But with only a minute gone in the second period Hartford captain Stan Poole outdueled his taller opponents off the boards and the deadly-shooting Owls hit on seven of 12 field goal attempts to erect a comfortable 29-17 buldge with the quarter only four minutes old. Cheverus never recovered and was badly whipped, 82-55.

Kubachka made a slight defensive change in the finale against the favored Governors from New Haven. Hartford pressed the state champions in the front court and then dropped back into a 3-2 zone, with the Hartford defenders dropping back closer to the basket and giving the Governors a little more outside shooting range. "With our boys nearer the basket," Kubachka explained after the contest, "it gave us better position for rebounds against Cross' three big and such was the case in the New England classic. Trailing Griffin and Poole in the scoring race were Pat Burke (40), Len Kostek (31) and Otis Woods (28). Burke also chipped in with 30 valuable

rebounds while Kostek, also a men." And the strategy paid off as the smaller Owls outrebounded Cross by a decisive margin enroute to a dazzling 68-62 triumph.

At Boston it was a case of Cross' big man, 6-foot-5 Dave Hicks picking up three quick personal fouls in the opening period and finally leaving the game with three minutes left in the second quarter after being tagged with his fourth personal. In the state championship game at New Haven, won by Cross, 65-59, Hartford's Poole picked up three first period fouls and sat out the entire second quarter.

Popular Selection

Poole's selection as the outstanding player in the New England tourney was a popular one. The brilliant Hartford leader chalked up 44 points and grabbed 53 solo rebounds in three games.

Equally popular was Ed Griffin's selection to the all-tournament team. The talented junior wound up with 50 points, high for the 1961 champions, and was credited with 46 rebounds. Griffin, who was also picked on the all-tourney squad at New Haven, finished tournament warfare (seven games) with a total of 103 markers and 99 rebounds.

Balance has been Hartford's forte throughout the past season. Poole, junior, converted 11 of 13 foul shots.

A check of the total individual scoring in both the state and New England tournaments again points out the excellent Hartford team balance. Four players averaged double figures. Griffin set the pace with a 14.7 mark, Poole followed with 12.7, Burke 12.4 and Woods 12.2. Kostek, the fifth starter, finished with a 9.7 average. Poole also finished with 92 solo rebounds and Burke had 73.

Defense At Its Best

As a well knit unit the Owls averaged 71 points in the New England event, a slight drop from their 72.3 mark at New Haven. But the Owls' defense was at its best at Boston where the opposition was held to an average of 53.3 points. At New Haven the Owls gave up an average of 62.3 markers.

Throughout the season Kubachka maintained that if his club played good defensive ball it could more than hold its own against the state's top quintets. This certainly proved the case at Boston. A potent offense, a strong defense and the desire to win make up a combination tough to beat in any sport.

And as one schoolboy fan remarked after Hartford's triumph at Boston, "Give an outstanding coach good players to work with and the ultimate result is a championship team regardless of the sport."