

Knights' rally falls shy against Australians

By Paul Durham Sports Editor

A disastrous first quarter aside, the Greenfield varsity boys basketball team played about as well as it has all season against School Sport Australia's 18-under traveling team Wednesday night.

But that 16-point deficit after the first eight minutes was too much for the host Knights as they dropped a 62-59 decision.

Greenfield got a game-high 25 points from junior Brian McNair while sophomore Brian Richardson contributed 17, although his final attempt -- a potentially game-tying 3-pointer at the buzzer -- caught the back iron of the rim.

"We got down by 16 and three weeks ago, we might have folded but we didn't panic, we kept battling," said Greenfield head coach Rob Salter, whose team dropped to 13-8.

"This is a big-time team," continued Salter, referring to the squad of elite Australian youths on a seven-game swing through North and South Carolina. "I told (my players) before the game this is one of the best teams we've faced."

The Knights could have very well given up after the opening minutes as the taller visitors from Down Under brought the thunder in the form of head-spinning passes and rim-rattling dunks.

The Australians featured seven players standing 6-foot-7 or taller but it was their speed that accounted for their quick start.

"You see tall and you think slow, sluggish -- but they were the total opposite," assessed McNair.

Cody Ellis, a 6-8 forward, scored six of his 13 points in the opening quarter as School Sport Australia hit 11-of-15 shots. Greenfield, conversely, connected on just two of its 14 first-quarter attempts before making 50 percent (20-of-40) of the remainder of its shots.

The Australians' lead topped out at 17 when Todd Blanchfield's jumper made it 29-12 at the 5:30 mark of the second quarter.

Twice the Knights slimmed the margin to nine but had to settle for a 37-26 deficit at halftime.

Darian Cahill and McNair were behind a 6-0 run to start the final quarter for the Knights, who finally tied the score at 55-55 on Damont Williams' steal and layup with 4:45 to play.

The Australian team, used to playing international rules, received a quick lesson in the American style of play as the referees whistled it for hand-checking and using the elbow on offensive drives. The SSA squad seemed a little frustrated as the Knights, driven by a small but vocal crowd, sensed a turnaround was at hand.

"Yes, a little bit," agreed SSA head coach Brett Sue See of his team's frustration at the calls. "But we've got to adjust. We're visitors here."

Greenfield had a chance to take the lead but missed a foul shot before Blanchfield drained his third and final trey for a 58-55 advantage with 3:47 to play. He finished with 13 points while Drew Phillips added 10 for the visitors, who shot 51 percent (25-of-49) from the floor.

Jesse Casperz finally gave the visitors some breathing room with two made foul shots before Richardson's final heave just missed.

"We fought hard. You can't give up," Richardson said, adding he hoped the Knights could maintain the momentum as they return to 1-A Coastal Plains Independents Conference action Friday at Kerr-Vance.

The Australians departed with their fourth victory in six tour games and a good deal of respect for their hosts, which was mutual.

"I wish we could play them every day!" said McNair.