



Home > Basketball > Leigh steps up, tops league foe in battle

Basketball Basketball Stories

Leigh steps up, tops league foe in battle

By Chris Jackson · January 13, 2022

439 0



Tyler Suzuki makes a three in Leigh's win over Independence. Chris Jackson / Staff Photo

Leigh remembered what happened during the spring.

It only lost three times in what amounted to a 10-3 campaign. But two of those losses were to Independence, one of which was in overtime, which kept the Longhorns away from a perfect regular season record before falling to St. Francis in the Central Coast Section Division II semifinals.

This time, Leigh was ready.

In a tough battle, the Leigh Longhorns (11-4, 1-0) opened up Mt. Hamilton League play with a 70-63 victory over the Independence 76ers (9-6, 0-1) in San Jose on Wednesday in the West Coast Preps Game of the Week.

[...]

The Longhorns capped the first quarter on a 15-3 run to take a 17-11 lead, as junior Zach Norcia was up to seven points and hitting pull-up jumpers, while Ewelt had five points. The ball was moving, Leigh was breaking through the Independence defense and everything was clicking.

At halftime, it was a 37-19 lead. After five turnovers in the first quarter, it only gave the ball away twice the following eight minutes.

"We made sure that everything was clicking on offense," Ewelt said. "We didn't turn the ball over as much. Last year we lost to them twice, and that was mostly because of us turning the ball over. This year, I feel like we handled the pressure really well."



While the deficit was up to 18 points, Independence fought its way in the ballgame until the very end, especially behind the play of senior Luciano Caro.

Caro made everything and cut his way through Leigh's zone defense. He scored 35 points, with 25 of those coming in the second half and 16 in the fourth quarter. He made three threes in the final 16 minutes, part of an effort where he connected on four three-pointers and had four steals.

"That dude is tough," said Leigh senior guard Colin Mantle. "He's got a good handle. He's quick and he can shoot it."

Caro's 31st point got Independence within 58-52 on a three, then senior Kenny Chau added to the party. He scored all eight of his points in the fourth, highlighted by making both of his three-pointers, while diving on the floor, chasing loose balls and making life difficult on opposing players.

With Chau and the 76ers hustling, they were now within 65-59.

"It was pretty tough," Mantle said. "We had a really good run. I got in foul trouble in the third quarter. Their pressure is always good."

Sophomore guard Tyler Suzuki seemingly had an answer for every Independence run with a three, as he made three of them in a nine-point effort – a season best.

Suzuki was one of four Longhorns with at least nine points entering the fourth quarter, as his nine helped Leigh to a 48-35 lead, which was just enough to hold off Independence in the end.

"I told him before the game that this was his game to shine, and he proved me right," Ewelt said.

Mantle, the team's leading scorer at 17.5 points per game, led Leigh with 24 points, was 2-of-4 from long range and 9-of-11 at the free throw line.

It marked the sixth time Mantle scored 20-plus points, just four below his season-high total of 28 versus Carmel. The three-year varsity player averaged 15.2 points as a junior.

"He's really special," Ewelt said. "He can make any three. Put your hand down, he's splashing it. He can take it off the dribble. He's really good for our team."

Norcia was unstoppable, too, with 19 points while going 2-for-4 at the three-point line and making all four of his free throws.

Norcia recorded his 10th double-digit scoring game. He came in averaging 12.7 points, 4.8 assists, 2.6 rebounds and 2.3 steals, and he's got two games of 20-plus points – 23 versus Branham and 20 against Soquel.

"Zach is huge," Mantle said. "He's a great point guard. He gets us set up and everything. He sets up the offense and can shoot the three. He came out firing, making everything, one dribble pull-ups."

Ewelt, despite battling injury for much of the slate, stepped up again and exuded strength in a 12-point outing.

Nine of Ewelt's 12 points came in the first half to give Leigh an 18-point halftime lead, plus he blocked two shots and was 6-for-8 on free throw shooting.

Ewelt is up to more than 14 points per game on over a 50% clip.

"He's great," Mantle said. "He plays defense, gets rebounds. He shoots the three. He can drive. He can dunk. He gets this crowd hyped."

Sophomore forward Caleb Asante scored six points and hauled in a pair of offensive boards, while junior small forward Miles Karandikar registered two points.

"For sure was tough because they went on a run late, but we kept battling back and we pushed us," Ewelt said. "We made sure that everything was clicking offense. We didn't turn the ball over as much. Last year we lost to them twice, and that was mostly because of us turning the ball over. This year, I feel like we handled the pressure really well."

MOST COMMENTED



Uncategorized

James Logan wins fifth in a row

Gregory Moreland-Tuhn · December 28, 2021 0