

CIF-SOUTHERN SECTION DIVISION 3AA BOYS BASKETBALL PLAYOFFS: Cerritos can't stop Crean Lutheran or officials, gets blasted in second round



By Loren Kopff

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The unranked Cerritos High boys basketball team knew it was going to be tough to get past 11th ranked Crean Lutheran High in the second round of the California Interscholastic Federation-Southern Section Division 3AA playoffs. But when you're battling against virtually a one-man wrecking crew, plus the officials, it's almost too much to handle.

That's what the Dons were facing in their second round game last Friday night and when the clock had read triple zeros, Cerritos was staring at a 78-61 loss. Cerritos, the second place representatives out of the Suburban League, ends its season at 20-8.

"They're a big team," said Cerritos head coach Jonathan Watanabe. "We had problems with their size early; we didn't play very well. I want to say it does have something to do with their defense because I talked to the University coach last night and he said the same thing. They have some really good guards and they had the same kind of problems."

Cerritos never led in the contest as the Saints built first quarter leads of 12-2, 15-4 and 19-8 with Isaiah Johnson closing out the stanza with his fourth basket with 5.2 seconds left. Johnson would be a thorn in Cerritos' side throughout the game, scoring 42 points and connecting on 16 of 18 shots from the field. Eight of those points came in the first period and by halftime, he had three fewer points than the total put up by the Dons.

The closest Cerritos would get in the second quarter was 10 points and that came 64 seconds in following a basket from senior Destin Flucas off a steal. After that, the Academy League champions went on a 10-0 run and maintained a lead of no fewer than 12 points the rest of the lead. At its peak, Crean Lutheran had a 21-point advantage, but not until the final minute of the game.

While Cerritos was having trouble stopping Johnson, who scored 14 of Crean Lutheran's 19 points in the third quarter, it was also facing a disadvantage with the officiating, which frustrated Watanabe the most. The Saints were called for four fouls in the first half, but it got worse in the second half when the officials whistled Cerritos 19 times to just eight for the Saints.

"I've never been a big critic of the officials, but we didn't have a chance tonight," he said. "The officials did not give us a chance to win the game tonight. I don't know why, but we had no chance. The calls were not the same on either side of the court. We were trying to adjust to what they were calling and they were not calling the same game on both sides."

Even with the deep bench that Cerritos had, the major disadvantage was causing havoc as four starters had four fouls and another one, senior Jyvonette Moore, fouled out nearly two minutes into the fourth quarter. A second Cerritos player, senior Brandon de Groot, also fouled out but with under two minutes remaining.

"I think the kids should dictate who wins the game" Watanabe said. "We have almost all seniors and the kids should be the ones that dictate who wins and who loses the game, not the officials. We didn't play one of our best games, but we didn't have a chance tonight."

Flucas led the Dons with 24 points, seven rebounds and three steals while senior Byron Sur added nine points and had three assists. Senior Dorian Harris also had seven boards as Cerritos had one of its finest seasons in school history, winning 20 games and losing less than 10 games in the same season for the first time in the 20 seasons it has been a member of the Suburban League. Next season, the Dons will move into the new 605 League with six returning players—three current juniors, two sophomores and a freshman. Cerritos had as many as 11 seniors begin the season.

"Over the last three years, this senior class has driven me nuts, made me work, made me earn my paycheck," Watanabe jokingly said. "But we've rebuilt, we've grown. We're not perfect; these are 17-year old, 18-year old high school kids. [But], they are a lot further along than they were."