

## Little Irish advance to semis

# Clutch free-throws eliminate defending champs, 61-59

By Richard A. Kiley

A number of factors may have contributed to Aquinas' 61-59 "upset" (no player for Aquinas considered it an upset) over previously undefeated East Friday night.

Maybe the defeat was a result of inexperience on the the Oriental squad, which started only one senior this year.

Or maybe it was Aquinas' 85 percent foul-shooting clinic, led by Eric Loewenguth's seven of nine points from the stripe, including two that hit nothing but net with :17 left on the clock to give the Little Irish a 61-57 lead.

Maybe it was East's mediocre 13-for-20 foul shooting that spelled defeat (a dismal six of 11 in the final quarter).

Or perhaps it was even Aquinas coach Mike Ruff, who called three pivotal time-outs in the last six-and-a-half minutes, when his team appeared to be feeling the pressure.

But the real reason Aquinas, now 15-5 for the season, will be advancing to the semifinals of this year's Section 5 Basketball Tournament is that, on this night, they just wanted to win a little more than East did.

Aquinas' supporters, who were among 1,200 spectators looking on, at Edison, rocked the gym all night during the "white knuckler" and seemed to smell victory from the very start. And why not? Aquinas enjoyed its best season in 20 years, upsetting Franklin and forcing the No. 4-ranked Orientals (New York State poll) into double overtime back in January before finally succumbing, 69-61. Ruff didn't have to remind his team — comprised mostly of seniors — of that game before Friday night's battle.

"We weren't intimidated at all of East, we proved that during the regular season," the fourth-year mentor said. "We were loose and confident."

If anything was intimidating, it was the fans on Aquinas' side of the gym. At times, their cheering and chanting was deafening in contrast to the relative quiet of East onlookers, who really had little to get excited about most of the night.

Their hopes as well as those of East to force the game into an extra period were lost when junior Dave Rizzo's shot from half court bounced harmlessly off the backboard with no time left on the clock.

Aquinas led 13-11 after one quarter and 26-25 at the half, thanks to Cris Thomas' bucket with just five ticks on the clock. Fans saw the lead change hands eight times in the second stanza before Thomas gave the Little Irish the lead going into the locker room.

It appeared East was down for the count barely a minute into the final quarter as Aquinas built up a seemingly comfortable 44-35 lead with 7:07 left. But when Jason Winston's jumper with 6:33 left cut the margin to five, Ruff felt the tide turning and called timeout to regroup his squad.

"I told them to calm down and relax," Ruff said after the game. "We were having trouble getting the ball in, so I changed our in bounds play also."

It proved to be good strategy for the Little Irish as they ran off a 10-2 spurt with three and-a-half remaining to increase the lead to 10, 55-45.

But coach Sal Rizzo's squad wouldn't say die, and when Winston again pulled the Orientals to within six at 55-49, Ruff again called time.

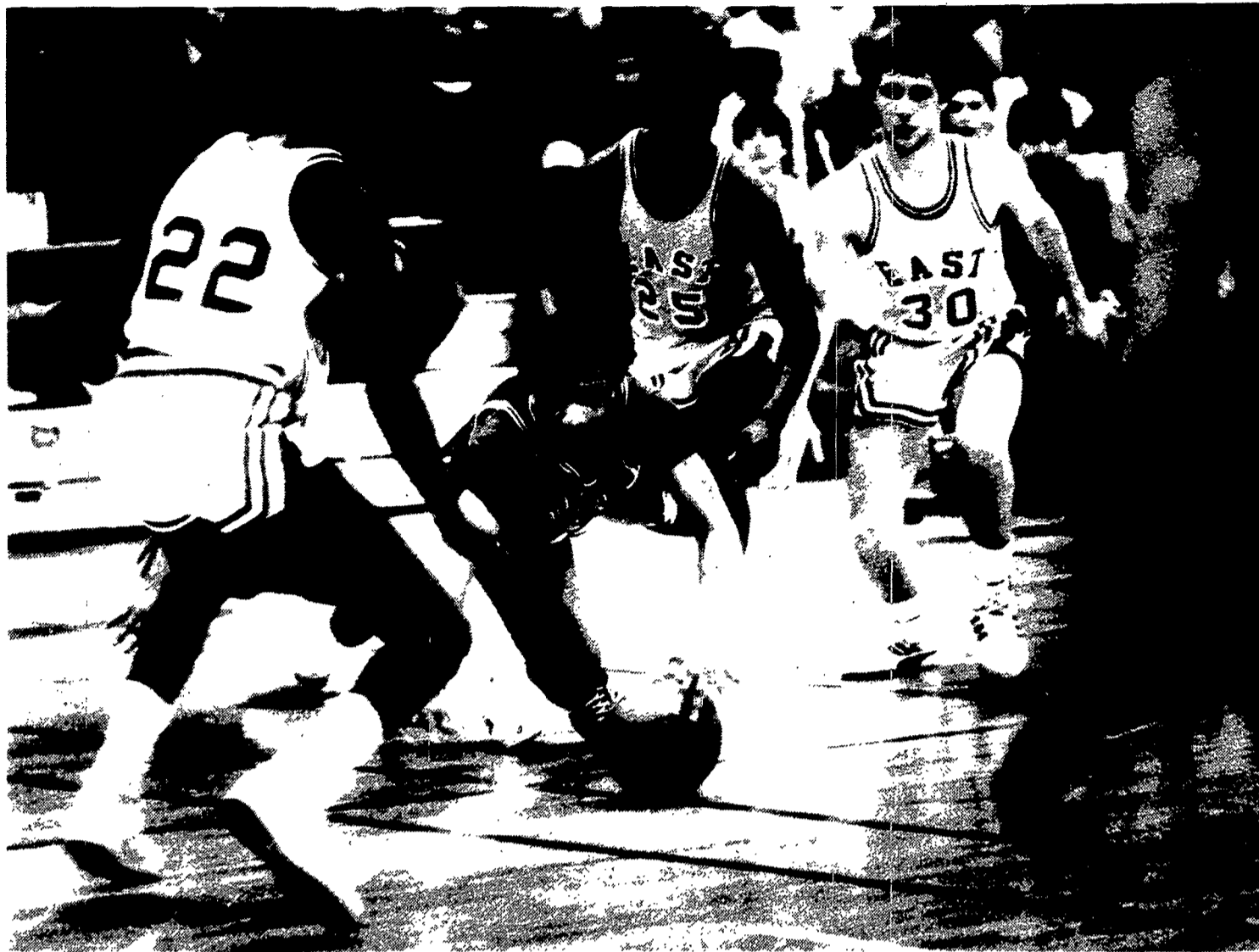
East continued its stunning 8-0 spurt and, with 1:41 remaining in regulation, junior sensation Quinn Smith pulled East to within two at 55-53.

Mental errors and inexperience, however, ended East's quest for back-to-back championships as well as the team's undefeated season when, with just over one minute left, sophomore Tony Scott was called for a three-second lane violation, giving East a chance to tie. Moments later, junior forward Sean Gray missed the front end of a one-and-one that would have pulled East to within two after Aquinas reserve Pat Moynihan hit both ends of a one-and-one to give the Little Irish a little breathing room with :40 left.

Winston's jumper cut Aquinas' lead to 59-57 with :17 to go, but Loewenguth hit his two clutch free-throws to increase the lead to four.

Smith's bucket with :09 remaining brought East back within two at 61-59. A jump-ball call with :02 remaining favored East because of the turn-of-possession arrow, which set the stage for Rizzo's desperation try at the buzzer.

**AQUINAS BEGAN ITS STRUGGLE** to become the first Catholic school to win the Section 5 Class AAA crown since Cardinal Mooney's 1982 squad, when the Little Irish



Wakili Moore of Aquinas dives for the ball during Friday night's game against East High School. The Little Irish defeated the defending champions, 61-59. Aquinas met Webster last night in the semifinals at the War Memorial.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

edged Greece-Arcadia on Tuesday, Feb. 18, in another Edison barn-burner, 64-56.

Wakili Moore, a truck disguised in human form, poured in 25 points while Loewenguth contributed 19 in a game that had the No. 8 (Aquinas) and No. 9 (Arcadia) seeds playing each other.

The game was not decided until the last three minutes of the fourth quarter, when the Aquinas outscored Arcadia by 14-7.

Once again, clutch free-throw shooting was instrumental in the victory for Ruff's squad, which went 12-for-15 from the stripe, including a perfect 6-for-6 showing by senior Tim Reynders, who had 11 points for the night. Moore was nearly perfect as he nailed four-of-five foul shots in the fourth quarter alone. Arcadia (11-8) was paced by Mike Bianchi's 22 points, while Ken Tysiac and Tim Herron added 11 each for the Titans.

**EAST ADVANCED TO PLAY** Aquinas by beating a scrappy Cardinal Mooney squad, 68-47, Feb. 18 at Penfield. The final score was not indicative of how close the game was at times. The Cardinals, seeded 17 in this year's tournament, led 14-12 at the end of the first eight minutes and trailed by a mere seven at half-time to the number one-seeded Orientals.

Mooney was helped by East's somewhat lethargic play in the first half and also the cold shooting of Rizzo, who repeatedly missed jump shots from the corner, but was the only one shooting for the tight East squad. East gained its first lead in the game a surprising three minutes into the second quarter, when Scott Trap stuffed one home and was fouled on the play. His conversion of the three-point-play gave East a 21-20 lead.

East's defense forced numerous Mooney mistakes in the second quarter, and coach Ed Nietopski's squad could muster just eight points in the second stanza. Nietopski did his best to keep his obviously out-talented club in the game by slowing the pace down to a half-court game, but East pulled away in the second half.

Scott had the hot hand for East, scoring 12 points in the second half and ending up with 21 for the night to grab game-high honors. Rizzo poured in 11 points while Smith added 10 points to put the game away.

Junior guard Walt Cusick's 12 points, aided by Pete Mojsej's and Kevin Khuns' eight points, each were too little to offset the powerful East squad. Nietopski's troops ended the year at 7-13.

Aquinas was scheduled to play Webster (17-3, fourth seed) last night in the Class AAA semifinals at the War Memorial.



Cris Thomas (42) is surrounded by Arcadia players as he goes up for a rebound during the Tuesday, Feb. 18 game. Aquinas beat Arcadia 64-56.