

Not so sweet 16 over for Forest Hills

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from the Morning Sentinel

A half-hour before the 8:30 a.m. tip off of their Western Maine Class D quarterfinal game against Elan, Forest Hills boys basketball coach Anthony Amero and a few of his players loitered outside their locker room. They wouldn't be allowed on the court for another 15 minutes, but they were ready to go.

For 16 years, the court at the Augusta Civic Center has given the Forest Hills boys basketball team nothing but trouble. Until Saturday's 45-42 win against Elan, the Tigers hadn't advanced past the regional quarterfinals since 1992. You would understand if the Tigers were a little hesitant to take the floor, but here they were, eager for the pregame warmups to begin.

With all respect to every team that will hoist a Gold Ball in two weeks, this is what makes the high school basketball tournament great. The teams that sweat this thing out, game by game, the only goal -- survive and move on -- they are what makes the tournament the place to be every February.

The Tigers' hometown of Jackman is one of the most isolated towns in the state.

It's a few miles closer to Quebec City than it is to Augusta. Enrollment at Forest Hills is a whopping 59 students. Amero had seven players at his disposal against Elan.

That's seven guys who will always remember they were on the team that broke years of one and done trips to the Augusta Civic Center.

That's seven guys, plus Amero of course, who will never forget how they felt when Lee Gach's desperation 3-pointer bounced off the back of the rim as the buzzer sounded.

"I was so happy once I heard the buzzer," senior point guard Mitch Lumbert said. Lumbert scored his only points of the game on a pair of foul shots with 2.9 seconds left to push the Tigers' lead to 45-42.

"With my luck in Augusta, I didn't want that shot to even be close. We thought we had him covered. I guess it was meant to be for us for once," Amero said.

In 1992, the last time the Tigers won a tournament game in Augusta, they reached the regional finals before bowing out. Forest Hills knocked off Averill in the quarters and Islesboro in the semis before top-seed and eventual state champion Buckfield sent them home.

The Forest Hills coach then was Jamie Weggler, the uncle of Forest Hills center Cody Gilboe.

Fittingly, Gilboe played a big part in the Tigers' win, scoring 20 points and grabbing 12 rebounds. "(Weggler's) been reminding us of it a lot," Amero said.

Forest Hills' small legion of fans sat in the stands directly behind the Tigers' bench, and they were just as thrilled as the team when the game was over.

"Right after the game, they all came down to the court and congratulated us," Lumbert said.

Added Amero: "Once the word gets out that the boys finally won one down here, there will be twice as many people here on Wednesday. It will be packed."

On Wednesday, Forest Hills takes on rival Valley. As they did before the quarterfinals, the Tigers will head south on Tuesday. Maybe they will practice at Messalonskee High School in Oakland, where Amero worked before he took over the Forest Hills program 11 years ago.


"The superintendent is going to have my hide, because the budget is getting way out of whack," Amero said.

"They didn't expect the boys to win this year. We're talking about \$1,000 for hotels and gas and all that."

It's money well spent. Anyone who has visited can tell you that Augusta is beautiful in late February. Now a new generation of Tigers get to find that out for themselves.

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