

Tohatchi Lady Cougars winning streak to state

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The red-hot and No. 3 ranked Tohatchi Lady Cougars broke open a close game in the third quarter and beat the Dexter Lady Demons 67-48 in a first round 3A state playoff game March 3 at Tohatchi High School.

The Lady Cougars advanced to play Tucumcari (21-6, 6-2) March 7 at the Santa Ana Star Center in Rio Rancho. The Lady Cougars beat Tucumcari 84-47. Tohatchi takes on No. 2 Texico (21-7, 6-1) on March 9 at Santa Ana, a team in which they've never played. The Lady Wolverines beat No. 12 Loving 54-39 to earn the right to face Tohatchi.

The Lady Cougars pounced the Lady Wolverines by a score of 69-44 Thursday, and headed to the finals March 10 to face Eunice Lady Bobcats at Wise Pies Arena. (For results, visit: gallupsun.com)

Tohatchi hasn't lost a game since Jan. 3 when Bloomfield beat the Lady Cougars 65-57 at Bloomfield.

In the Dexter game, Tohatchi got out to a 23-8 first quarter lead, but Dexter grinded things out and slowly got back in the game. The second quarter ended with Tohatchi up 30-24.

"We picked it up on defense and Cheyenne (Begay) got hot on offense," Tohatchi head coach Tanisha Bitsoi said. "It was almost as if we were just waiting for a moment to break the game open."

Begay was part of a 13-0 Tohatchi run in the beginning part of the third quarter in which the senior all-state guard stole the ball several times and got back on multiple occasions on defense during Dexter fast breaks to deflect passes.

Begay converted layups on steals on back-to-back plays that all but sent the jam-packed Tohatchi faithful into mad frenzies several times. The Lady Demons never recovered from Begay's offensive and defensive outburst.

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“It was that third quarter,” Lady Demons’ head coach Elizabeth Elizondo said. “Basically, they went on multiple runs and we weren’t able to answer with points or defense.”

On one play with 4:43 left in the third, Begay stole the ball outright from near the top of the key and went coast-to-coast for an uncontested left-handed layup. Begay, who transferred to Tohatchi from Wingate three years ago, is a right-handed player.

On another play in the third, fellow all-state Tohatchi point guard Kalian Mitchell found Begay open in the left corner on what appeared to be a busted play. Begay sank what looked to be a 3-pointer, but got credit for two points on the play.

Tohatchi’s inside core of freshman forward Samantha Belone and fellow freshman forward Gabrielle Thomas had their hands full trying to contain Dexter junior shooting guard Madison Bogle. When Bogle wasn’t killing the Lady Cougars with the complete floor game, junior point guard Bryana Muñoz was penetrating and dishing to junior guard Vlaney Villalobs for jumpers or back door layups.

Begay finished the game with 21 points – most were scored in the decisive third quarter. Mitchell pouted in 16 points and was a handful from the point guard position for Dexter. The Lady Demons were coming off two consecutive losses – one to Lovington 65-39 on Feb. 18 and the other to Capitan 31-19 on Feb. 20.

“I expect every game that we play from here on out to be like this,” John Brooks, athletic director at Tohatchi, said of the capacity crowd. “This is how it is when any of our basketball teams make the post-season.”

Tohatchi (23-5, 8-0) ended the 2017 regular season as the No. 3 ranked girls team in 3A in New Mexico.

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