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By JASON EPP

High Plains Daily Leader

HOOKER, OKLA.-- Hooker's normally reliable senior frontcourt of Michael Wiebe and Josh Faulkner had an off night in which they combined for only four second half points, and freshman Payson Slater scored 22 to lead a Bulldogs late surge against the Stratford Elks that fell five short at 55-50.

"We had a chance," said Bulldogs coach Brad Coffman. "We were down by five, but don't box out on the free throw. We have too many mental lapses in tight games, critical situations and guys don't do what they are supposed to do. It just kills us."

It did not start that way. Faulkner scored 8 of the Bulldogs 10 first ten points, and looked to be a force on the blocks to keep Hooker in the game.

Meanwhile, Stratford built a lead on diversity. Eight different players scored in the first 18 points for the Elks. Stratford built on to their lead and increased it to 28-19 at the halftime break.

Faulkner scored with 6:44 left in the third to cut the Elks lead to 6, but was hampered in his ability after spraining his ankle shortly after. After Faulkner went to the bench, Stratford went on a 9-0 run to lead by 18.

Slater scored on three straight trips at the end of the third quarter, but could not cut into the Elks lead at they matched him with their own buckets. Alex Sanchez hit a three early in the fourth to cut the lead to ten, but Stratford quickly increased it back to 15.

The Bulldogs then went on a 9-0 run capped by Chad Kennedy's three that cut the lead to five. Chad Kennedy had just come into the game when Blake Kennedy had to leave with five fouls. But Chad Kennedy's second three fell just short.

Hooker's one last chance came when Luis Ortega of Stratford missed both free throws with 22 seconds left. But the Elks rebounded the miss and held on to win 55-50.

Coach Coffman did see some positives, especially at the end.

"I was pleased we battled back. We were down fifteen. If we can ever get over those mental lapses eventually we are going to come out on top in those games. I am proud of our execution late in the game."

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