



By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

The Green House transformed from a basketball gym to a reception hall Wednesday after Leslee Smith's clutch bank-shot gave the Saints a 62-60 win over Hutchinson to lock up the school's third consecutive Jayhawk West championship.

The improbable run of eight consecutive victories in the second half of the conference season was necessary for the Saints to win the title, and it was perhaps a daunting task considering where the Saints were at that time.

Eight wins ago, Seward was 15-7 overall and 6-2 in the Jayhawk West.

The Saints lost their opening game of the conference at home to Barton 79-66 before losing at Hutchinson 87-74 despite having a double digit lead in the first half.

Before the conference slate started, Seward was 10-4, and it seemed unlikely that the Saints would be able to defend the title, especially with a hot Hutchinson team that started the season 24-0.

Seward's low point might have been a 71-65 loss to Northwest Kansas Tech, a school in its first year of basketball. That loss came in the Green House when Northwest Kansas Tech was 4-9.

Some may have thought that Seward's run at the top of the Jayhawk West would come to an end.

"It's been a tough road, any of these can tell you," Seward coach Bryan Zollinger said. "We come in this gym and practice. We are running, cursing and getting after it. I felt like for us to get from where we were against Barton to where we are tonight, we told them they had to get eight straight, you can't stub your toe, and they did it."

The music continued to blare in the Green House, and one classic anthem might have summed up how Zollinger was able to turn his group around. Journey's "Any Way You Want It, That's the Way You Need It" filled the gym, and that is how Zollinger has coached his team.

Leslee Smith, the hero that hit the game-winning shot against Hutch, has bought in to the system.

"We just have to believe in what we did for this whole year and it came through," he said. "I believed in every thing they told me from Day 1."

That included learning how to play the entire game, something they did not do against Hutchinson the first time.

"This game we played for 40 minutes," Smith said. "The last game we played a good first half, then we eased off. This time we stayed focused the whole 40 minutes and played good defense."

Bumpy road ends with title

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Getting players to accept the coaching may be a bumpy ride, but the rewards have been three straight conference titles.

“It can be a frustrating process for players and the coaches,” Zollinger said. “We are not lowering the standard. I may not be the smartest, but we will work hard, and the guys said, ‘Ok, let’s buy in.’”