By EARL WATT

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Kowan Russell was tired of seeing his team lose Western Athletic Conference games, and he didn't want to see Jade Cathey try to carry the offensive load by himself.

So Russell did something about it Friday night in the Big House.

Russell scored eight of Liberal's first 10 points in the first four minutes of Friday night's game against Great Bend to lead Liberal to a 10-3 run and a 55-45 win.

"I was just trying to get a WAC win," Russell said. "We got fired up and came out ready to play."

After falling to Hays, Garden City and Dodge City, the team met earlier in the week, and the intensity to start the game with Great Bend was much higher than in the previous games.

"I played more physical than I have been," Russell said. "At first, my role was to play defense and get rebounds. But I need to score, too, to help Jade and help us win games."

Liberal coach Drew Gruver also recognized the difference in his team's intensity.

"They came to play tonight," he said. "It was a heckuva lot harder than the other night (against Dodge City). That makes it more fun for them, for us as coaches and for the fans. I credit them for coming together and deciding that they can't do it on their own, they have to play as a team."

Russell might have been able to dominate the paint even more, but he had to come out to get his knee taped after the quick spurt to start the game.

The Panthers connected on two first quarter three pointers to cut the lead to four, but intense play inside built Liberal's lead back to five.

With time running out in the quarter, Cathey fired up a three-pointer at the buzzer that clanked off the glass and through the hoop to give the Redskins a 19-11 lead.

And the Redskins continued to play at a higher pace in the second quarter.

Bryce Johnson had two put-back baskets early in the quarter, and the Redskin defense had the Panthers caged.

The Redskins ended the half on a 15-6 run to double up the Panthers 34-17 at half.

But the Panthers didn't call it quits at half. Great Bend came out firing in the third quarter, and after a Panther three-pointer the lead was cut to eight, 34-26.

"We knew they would make a run," Gruver said. "We had to be tough enough to withstand it.

We weathered the storm and countered it."

Great Bend's Jordan Basye was a big part of the Panther rally. He hit five three pointers in the game, three in the second half.

But the Panthers had no answer for Cathey in the second half. The standout junior continued to push to the goal for high percentage baskets, and the Redskins stretched back to a 13-point lead, 50-37.

The Panthers attempted to foul to get back in the game, but the Redskins were able to hit six of eight from the line down the stretch to preserve the 55-45 win in a physical WAC contest.

For Russell, there was a bit of revenge in the game.

"Last year they won WAC," he said. "They beat us here."

For Gruver, seeing Russell step up, and the rest of the squad play more team-oriented ball was encouraging.

"Kowan crashed the boards hard and got some easy put-backs," Gruver said. "But the team got him the ball. That's how we need to play every game."