

By EARL WATT

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Missed Redskin free throws (12 of 22) and an early 8-0 run by the Holcomb Longhorns turned out to be too much for the Liberal to overcome in a 55-43 road loss in the season opener.



The 12-point margin for the loss didn't reflect how close the two teams played for most of the night.

"We had to foul late," Liberal coach Scott Hinkle said. "We had some good looks, we just didn't get the ball to go in the hole like we needed. We will get better."

An early turning point came when a tie game became an eight-point Holcomb lead after Longhorn Heath Tucker was left open for back-to-back three point shots, and Holcomb added a two free throws to take the lead.

The Redskins fought uphill the rest of the night and could not overcome the momentary defensive lapse that provided Holcomb a cushion.

"We kept switching defenses," Hinkle said. "We switched to match-up zone, then we'd go man. We did a half-court trap. They were doing the same thing. We went on a stretch where we left Heath Tucker unguarded and he hit back-to-back threes. Then they hit two free throws. We went from tied to down eight in three possessions. That was huge in the first half. If we don't do

that it makes a big difference — bottom line. It comes down to being patient on offense. Defensively we lost our kids a couple of times. That comes from switching and experience. We will be better Tuesday.”

Hinkle is in his first year back at the helm of the Redskins, and he has implemented a new system, something that doesn't always gel by the opener.

“We didn't execute on offense like we can,” he said. “We put in a whole new offense. We knew there would be some growing pains. There were some bright spots.”

One of those bright spots was freshman Deladrius Green who led the Redskins with 10 points. Liberal had other young players step up including Jared Hasik and Timothy Fitzgerald.

They joined an experienced senior group of Blake Stout, Britton Abbott and others, and that blend should be a benefit as the season progresses.

“We really don't have that one star, that go-to person,” Hinkle said. “We have a group of guys that at any point in time can get after it defensively. For us to be really good, we have to get better defensively.□ We had open looks and didn't hit shots. Hayden Coker, our big post didn't score. Blake Stout scored a little. They will start knocking those down, and when we get a few of those going down we will be fine.”

Hinkle returned to the sidelines for the first time in more than 10 years after assisting Seward coach Jim Littell to the Lady Saints national championship.

“I can get better as well,” he said. “Luckily, I have a great staff. They do a great job of helping on the sideline. They are involved in what is going on as much as I am. They are unbelievable.□ Without them, it wouldn't have been as close as it was. It is an adjustment, not being the guy on the sideline for so long. The kids have to get better, and I do as well.”

Liberal will have a chance to rebound Tuesday when Guymon comes to the Big House for the annual Highway 54 Showdown.

After that, the Redskins will host Lawton Okla., Friday and Bartlesville Saturday.

“I’m excited,” Hinkle said. “It’s a group of kids that want to work hard and want to win. I believe the immediate future is bright. They are chomping at the bit to come right back Tuesday. We will see what we are made of in the first week-and-a-half.”