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By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

Nine points.

That's all Garden City could manage against the Seward County defense in the first half. The Saints made the first half stick in a 69-60 win to remain atop the Jayhawk West Conference.

The only number worse than the nine points the Broncbusters scored was their shooting percentage. Eight percent. Garden City only made two of 25 attempts in the first half. Their other five points came from the free throw line, and they also missed nine of those in the first 20 minutes.

While the Broncbusters struggled to hit the broadside of a barn, Seward raced out to a 13-3 lead in the first seven minutes of the half, and Niem Stevenson started a career night by scoring nine of those points.

The Saints continued to make shots while frustration set in on the Garden City bench.

By halftime, Seward had a 26-9 lead.

Garden City improved in the second half, but the damage had already been done.

Seward led by as many as 17 in the second half, but the Broncbusters were able to narrow the deficit to 12 with 14:14 to play.

Quentin Purtue then showed some frustration when he slammed the ball to the court and was called for a technical.

That allowed Garden to narrow the gap to 10 points, and Jalen Variste added another Garden City bucket to cut the lead to eight with 14:27 to play.

Seward recovered with a 6-0 run, and Stevenson added a three pointer with 10:52 to play that gave Seward a 42-27 lead.

Garden narrowed the lead back to 11 with 7:03 to go, but Stevenson again drained a three followed by an Evan Allen bucket and a Malcolm Hill-Bey jumper, and the Saints were up by 18, 53-35.

The final two minutes were a foul fest for both teams, and the Saints only made 11 of 17 attempts down the stretch that allowed Garden City to trim Seward's advantage, but the Broncbusters

never overcame the first-half struggles, and the Saints were able to preserve the 69-60 win.

“You hold a team to 8 percent from the field, outrebound them by 10, and block some shots, there’s not a lot I can complain about,” Seward coach Zollinger said. “Our defense was bordering on great in the first half.”

Stevenson scored 36 points, and the rest of the Saints combined for 33.

First place Seward (18-8, 8-2) will travel to Dodge City (14-12, 3-7) Saturday.

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