

Coach Bryan Zollinger discusses a play with Jon Tassin Monday at the Green House. Zollinger has been trying to instill excellence in his second year at Seward, and the team responded with a dominating performance over Hutchinson, 82-58.

Daily Leader photo/

Earl Watt



In a season where Seward has gone to five overtime games, and lost three of them, where the leading scorer suffered an injury and missed the entire conference schedule, where the Saints had big first half leads disappear during second-half meltdowns, Seward discovered they could still play like champions on ...

ANY GIVEN MONDAY

By EARL WATT

• Daily Leader

After shocking the NJCAA a year ago with a third place national finish, after shooting out to a 13-0 start this season, the Seward County Saints' basketball season seemed to derail, dropping six of the last nine games.

Bryan Zollinger was looking for something, anything, to provide the motivation to get that spark back for his team.

He found it in Al Pacino.

Prior to Monday's must-win game against Hutchinson, Zollinger shared the locker room clip from "Any Given Sunday" with his team.

And the inspired play that followed resulted in an 82-58 rout of the Hutchinson Blue Dragons.

"I couldn't be more pleased and proud of how our team responded tonight," Zollinger said. "After the adversity we've faced, tonight was a positive step. They responded as men."

The defensive pressure, and the drive to score has been missing in recent games, but there was no denying that the Saints were playing high-stakes basketball against the Blue Dragons.

An emotional Zollinger had difficulty expressing himself after the big home win.

"Everyone dug in," he said. "I told the team what Al Pacino said from 'Any given Sunday.' The inches we need to succeed are all around us. We watched that clip in the locker room before the game. A lot of

guys got pretty emotional, so it is nice to know that after all the hard work we put in that guys care enough to step up like that.”

And step up they did.

At times, it seemed like Seward had more players on the court than Hutchinson with defensive intensity that double-teamed every Blue Dragon that touched the ball.

Seward forced 25 turnovers.

The Saints slipped out of the gate and only scored one basket in the first three minutes. Seward trailed Hutch 8-2.

Over the next three minutes, Seward went on a 10-2 run capped by a Thijin Moses three-pointer to take a 14-10 lead.

Seward never trailed the rest of the way.

The defensive pressure continued to force Hutch into low-percentage shots while the Saints continued to push for the basket.

With the final seconds ticking away before half, Seward snagged three-straight rebounds off of missed shots and tips before Jon Tassin finally tipped the ball in as the half expired to give the Saints a 44-34 lead.

And this time, there would be no second-half let-down.

Marquez Patterson opened the half with a three-pointer, and moments later Robert Sigala hit another to put Seward ahead 50-35.

“We made some tweaks to open the flow up for the guards,” Zollinger said. “But it was our attitude to play better more than an X or O deal. It was players responding as men.”

Hutchinson never made a serious run the entire second half. The Blue Dragons never had more than four consecutive points. On this night, the Saints intensity continued from the tip to the final buzzer.

“I thought there were a couple of times where we started to take a quick shot,” Zollinger said, “and I would give them the ‘Hey’, and point to the head. ‘Have poise,’ and they responded. I made a concerted effort to have more poise myself. They responded to that. Mostly it was men managing the clock, time and score situation.”

Tassin led the Saints with 16 points, Moses scored 14, Patterson had 11, and Robert Sigala had a Jayhawk West Conference high of 10.

“Maybe we’re starting to turn that corner,” Zollinger said. “We’ll see through the next few games.”

With seven conference games remaining, Seward showed that any given Monday could turn out to be any given season.

“We have to play hard every night,” Zollinger said. “We have to play tough with the ball every night and show passion and care about what were doing. It’s not what you know, but are you willing to work hard and work with other people and make sacrifices.”

Seward (17-6, 4-5) travels to Great Bend to face No. 10 Barton (21-2, 8-1) at 8 p.m. Wednesday.