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Sharon Boys Continue Incredible Journey

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Barre, Vt. — It's official: Weird stuff happens when the Sharon Academy boys basketball team comes to Barre Auditorium.

This one just came out in their favor.

Long-range sharpshooter Austin Gaudette scored a game-high 23 points with four 3-pointers, including one from 28 feet away, near the scorer's table, that resembled a trick shot.

His performance in Saturday afternoon's 63-46 win over No. 3 Poultney in the VPA Division IV semifinal game at the Aud helped send the undefeated, No. 2-seeded Phoenix to their second championship appearance in four years.

"I was very pleased with our effort, particularly defensively," Sharon head coach Blake Fabrikant said. "I'm a perfectionist. Of course, we get into the locker room. We celebrate. And then I point out the things we need to do better. But overall, I thought it was a really solid effort. I think we're capable of playing better."

Things were a bit off before the game even started.

Sharon's first trip to Aud since its heartbreaking loss in the 2015 D-IV final started late after the bus scheduled to pick up Poultney on Saturday morning arrived late.

The Blue Devils finally showed up 15 minutes before the scheduled 2 p.m. tip off, and the game did not start until half an hour later.

In Monday's final, the Phoenix (23-0) will take on top-ranked Danville (21-1) with a chance to give the school its first team championship in its 16-year varsity history.

Gaudette, the senior who transferred from Hartford High before the season, seems to have found a home at Sharon.

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He entered the semifinals averaging 16.2 points per game largely as an outside shooter, the ideal compliment to Phoenix senior Sam Knoerlein's strength inside.

"We weren't very successful (at Hartford)," Gaudette said on his decision to switch schools. "I figured, why not just do this and go for it. It's my last year of high school basketball. I might as well do something and make a change.

"I played AAU with Sam (Knoerlein)," he added. "I played a little bit in summer league with them, too. It was a little bit hard in the beginning. But we mixed together really well. We all get along. There's that connection."

Gaudette took his game to a whole other level in the semis, netting 13 in the first half on his way to a postseason high.

His impressive 3-pointer with 3 minutes, 25 seconds left in the fourth quarter was just icing on the cake. He took a few seconds to stare down a long-range bomb from in front of the official scorer's table that went off the back rim and in.

"I was hesitating a little bit," Gaudette said of the shot. "I knew I could hit it, I just thought I would go for it."

Cole Ward and Gaudette started off with back-to-back 3's early on in the first quarter. Fisher Kelley added four points. Sharon's defense held the Blue Devils (22-3) to just five points in the first eight minutes, and the Phoenix took a 16-5 lead into the second quarter.

They never looked back, maintaining a lead of at least seven points for the rest of the game.

"They were more inexperienced than we are. The game plan was to kind of jump on them in the beginning," Fabrikant said. "I knew once we did that, I knew they'd make some runs but they'd never quite catch up to us."

Knoerlein finished with 18 points, the 21st time he's scored double digits this winter. Fisher Kelley netted 10 points and Ward scored six. Fabrikant was particularly impressed with the play of Olly Skeet-Browning, who scored four points on free throws off the bench, but played particularly tight defense on Blue Devil big man Levi Haviland.

"Austin put us on his shoulders today," Fabrikant said. "He did everything — offense, defense, hitting 3s, setting his teammates up. He was definitely the glue of the team. (He was) my MVP.

As for Skeet-Browning, Fabrikant said: "His hustle, he brought energy. ... We had a hard time with their two bigs (Haviland and Heath Mason). He just out-worked them."

Freshman Levi Allen scored a team-high 15 points for Poultney. Haviland, a junior, and Rob Brill, a senior, scored 11 points. The semifinal appearance was Poultney's first since 2001, and its first in D-IV since 1994. The Blue Devils competed in D-III between 1995 and 2017, failing to advance past the quarterfinal round in all but three seasons.

Sharon's history is not nearly as long, which serves as both a blessing and a curse for team history that lives in the short-term memories of many.

Fabrikant and his team are ready for anything that happens, no matter how strange. This time around, the Sharon coach hopes for a different ending.

"I'm encouraged for Monday," Fabrikant said. "Danville plays a lot harder defense than Poultney does. Some of those careless mistakes we make in our end are not going to fly on Monday. But I've always known this team is good. We're inconsistent. But we play in spurts, and when we play well, I think we're unbeatable. ... If we put four quarters together, we can beat anybody."

Monday's championship game is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. in Barre.

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Correction

The Sharon Academy boys basketball team's last appearance in the Vermont Principals Association Division IV final came in 2015. An earlier version of this story misstated the year in which the last championship visit took place.
