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The Perfect End: TSA Completes Perfect Season With School's First Title (Video)

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Barre, Vt. — Sharon Academy was well overdue for some luck in a state final.

It got some in the form of inches with 4.9 seconds to go in the fourth quarter of Monday's VPA Division IV boys basketball championship at the Barre Auditorium. It was the difference between a game-tying 3-pointer from sharp-shooting Danville sophomore guard Ian Steele and a rebound that secured the Phoenix's first team state championship of any kind in school history, 60-56.

Steele had already torched Sharon for seven threes. Why, thought Sharon head coach Blake Fabrikant and the hundreds in attendance supporting the Phoenix, would this one be different?

Steele pulled up to the left, dodging a steal attempt by diving Sharon senior Austin Gaudette and launched a deep bomb with the Indians down by three points. The ball hit the back of the rim, then the front, then out, to the outstretched hands of Sharon junior Fisher Kelley. Danville scrambled for the rebound. Jump ball. Possession Phoenix. Game over.

Sharon had its first Vermont Principals Association state championship in its 16-year history. It finished the winter a perfect 24-0, the fifth D-IV team in VPA history to go undefeated and the first since Twinfield did so in 2011.

"It means so much for the school. It's such a weight lifted off of our shoulders," Fabrikant said.

"Honestly, we started to think we were cursed. It's not just the fact that we're losing in finals, it's the way we're losing in finals. It's just a huge moment."

Sharon, which opened as a middle school in 1996 before later expanding into a high school, has made eight state final appearances in three sports — five in boys soccer, one in girls soccer and two in boys basketball — since the school started VPA athletic competition in 2002. All of those visits had been

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losses until Monday.

Kelley and Sam Knoerlein got the job done for Sharon, scoring a combined 42 points for a Phoenix squad that relied heavily on its strength underneath the basket. The pair also combined for the biggest play of the game.



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Final: Sharon 60, Danville 56. For the first time ever - in any sport - the Phoenix are state champions

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Danville took its first and only lead of the game, 56-55, with 1:08 remaining in the fourth quarter. Sharon had led by 10 points less than six minutes earlier before the No. 1-seeded Indians (21-2) went on a 14-3 run, capped off by a breakaway layup by Riley Fenoff, to pull ahead.

Knoerlein answered seconds later, seeing Kelley underneath the hoop in a one-on-one battle with Danville's Ben Overby on Sharon's next possession. Knoerlein floated up a contested pass into the area. Kelley reached over Overby's head, grabbed the ball cleanly and reached up for the easy layup.

"I saw Sam looking my way, and I saw that ball come in the air. I don't know, I just said, 'Screw it, I'll just go up and grab it.'" said Kelley of the play. "I knew I was close to the basket, and I knew I had had a ton of those during the season. I just made it ordinary.

"Inside play was huge," he added. "They have really aggressive, fast guards. We knew, since their defense was so aggressive (on the perimeter), that they'd have some weakness inside. We just tried to exploit that. ... Sam and I, the whole season we've been attacking the inside. That was a key for us in this game."

Sharon took the lead back with Kelley's basket, 57-56, with 54 seconds left to go in the fourth quarter. Knoerlein's two free throws with 22.1 seconds left — he finished the game 8-for-10 from the charity stripe — put the Phoenix up, 59-56.

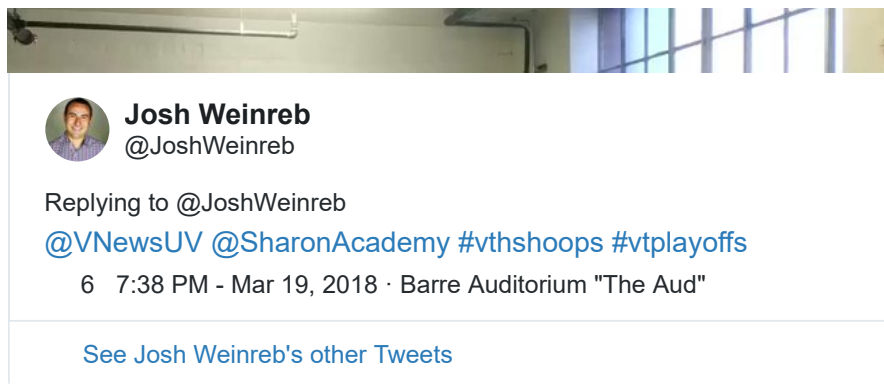
Then, on Danville's next possession, came the 3-point attempt from Steele. He had hit two threes at the buzzer to end both the first and second quarters, and another three in the fourth quarter before the miss. Knoerlein said he thought, when the shot went up, that it was like 2015 all over again, when a late Proctor rally stole the D-IV title out of Sharon's hands. Fabrikant said his heart sank.

This time, luck was on their side. This time, Sharon kept its composure in the final minutes of the fourth quarter. This time, they walked away champions.

"When (Steele) started hitting all those threes, it just sort of felt like three years ago," Knoerlein said. "They started coming back; they had whittled the lead down to two at one point. But I knew with this group, we were composed. We had playmakers everywhere. ... I knew we could keep it away from them getting clutch free throws, clutch shots.

Sharon led 18-12 after the first quarter before Danville found its rhythm in the second. The Indians held Sharon scoreless for nearly six minutes of play after two quick Phoenix baskets, a 3-pointer from Kelley and a layup by Knoerlein. They mounted a 9-0 run that tied the game, 23-23, with 1:38 left before half.

Gaudette got Sharon back on the scoreboard seconds later, hitting two free throws. But Steele's second 3-pointer in the dying seconds cut Sharon's lead to 28-26 at halftime.



"He's a great player as a sophomore; it's insane," Knoerlein said of Steele. "Every time he shot it, it seemed like it was going in."

The Phoenix rebuilt its lead in the third quarter, taking a 47-39 lead into the final stanza. Nine of Sharon's 13 points in the fourth quarter were from free throws, countered by three 3-pointers by Steele that gave Danville a chance.

The title appearance was Danville's third in eight years and first since 2012. It graduates six from this year's team, four starters, but will likely be led by Steele for the next two years.

Sharon graduates six of its nine athletes: Knoerlein, Gaudette, Josh Amodeo, Cole Ward, Jack DiGuseppe and Koltin LeDuc. It'll be a very different team next year, no doubt. But the veteran group is confident its championship win finished its mission.

"I am so used to things not going our way in the final moments of these championship games," Fabrikant said. "To have pulled this out means everything to us. We have been competitive in soccer and basketball for a long time. ... It's a big weight off of our shoulders. We've earned it.

"This school has been waiting for a championship for a long time, and it's about time we delivered."

Notes: As if things couldn't get weirder on days the Phoenix come to the Barre Auditorium, Sharon had no school on Monday due to a broken heater system, throwing a wrench into Fabrikant's pregame plans. ... The Sharon coach started an "undefeated" chant after the game with a rambunctious student section. Fabrikant then stood on the ladder, cut the rest of the net down from its hoop and lifted it high above his head in celebration. He wore the netting around his neck down into the locker room and out of the building. ... Danville was in foul trouble midway through the fourth quarter, with starters Fenoff and Matt Colburn fouling out before the game was finished. ... Sharon returns Kelley, Olly Skeet-Browning and Scooter Elder from this year's squad.

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