

# Pasadena Star-News



St. Francis celebrates as the defeat La Canada 56-53 during a CIF-SS semifinal prep playoff basketball game at Maranatha High School in Pasadena, Calif., on Friday, February 28, 2014. (Keith Birmingham / Staff Photographer)

## St. Francis boys basketball knocks out La Canada

By Aram Tolegian, San Gabriel Valley Tribune

Like a heavyweight boxer doling out body shots until his opponent crumbles, so went the St. Francis High School boys basketball team on Friday night.

St. Francis wore down La Canada and when the Spartans went cold late, the Knights delivered the knockout blow in a 56-53 win in the semifinals of the CIF-Southern Section Division 3A playoffs played in front of a packed house at Maranatha High.

The Knights improved to 19-11 and will make the school's first appearance in a CIF championship game against Oak Park on either Friday or Saturday at a site to be determined. La Canada fell to 23-7 and must hope to make the state tournament or its season is over.

"We are sure of one thing: our physical strength is going to be a factor in the game," St. Francis co-head coach Ray O'Brien said. "Three-point shooting teams struggle in the fourth quarter if you've worn their legs out.

"It's always part of our strategy, to wear them down. And that's what ended up happening."

La Canada led after every quarter and was ahead 48-42 entering the fourth quarter. St. Francis kept plugging away and the Spartans, who moved the ball so well through the first three quarters, became a wreck.

St. Francis guard Kyle Leufroy gave his team its first lead since early in the first quarter on a drive to the basket with just over four minutes to play. Leufroy was fouled on the play and made the free throw to make it 53-51.

St. Francis eventually led 55-51 before La Canada cut it two on a pair of free throws by Koko Kurdoghlian. The Spartans had the ball back down 55-53 with under 40 seconds to play but couldn't get a shot off and eventually lost it out of bounds.

Leufroy was fouled and hit one free throw, leaving La Canada with hopes of tying the game in the waning seconds. Again, the Spartans couldn't get a shot off as St. Francis stiffened and the game was over.

"They're just so physically strong that I think they wore us out," La Canada coach Tom Hofman said. "Our shooters did a great job for 30 minutes, but I think they just got tired.

"Give them credit, they were just hounding our shooters and just flat-out wore us out."

Leufroy saved his best for last by scoring eight of his game-high 22 points in the fourth quarter. With La Canada reeling, Leufroy's aggressiveness paid off as he kept forcing the action by going to the rim.

"We came this far and we have a lot of hungry seniors on this team and we're not looking to lose," Leufroy said.

"When I got that 'and one,' that was a big momentum changer and that gave us the lead.

"It's huge. We've been talking about it since before the season, that we might have a good chance to win a CIF championship. We didn't come this far to lose and the job's not done yet."

After a slow start, La Canada's motion offense started clicking midway through the first quarter. And with sharpshooter Grant Arthur on fire, it wasn't long before the Spartans had a solid lead.

La Canada led by as many as nine points and a late run by St. Francis before halftime made it 20-19 Spartans at the break.

Arthur finished with five 3-pointers. The Spartans couldn't pull away in the third quarter as St. Francis' deep bench led to six Knights scoring points in the quarter and keeping it close going into the final quarter.

La Canada was stuck on just two points scored in the quarter until Kurdoghlian's two free throws with just over a minute to play.

"The physical conditioning and the strength of our kids is going to play a factor in the game," O'Brien said. "That could be a factor probably more in the fourth quarter than it is in the first quarter.

"They (La Canada) didn't hit as many three's and they didn't move as fast in the fourth quarter."