

The Bandera PROPHECY

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Bulldogs put playoff win, 20-win mark, and historic year for basketball program on the books

By Brady Keane

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The Bandera varsity boys basketball team recorded its first playoff win since 2013-2014 last week and reached the 20-win mark for the second consecutive season in the process.

The Bulldogs defeated Cuero 72-62 Monday Night at Northside ISD Gymnasium at Harlan High School in a thrilling, back-and-forth game in front of a packed crowd on the Bandera side.

The Bulldogs were lights out from the 3-point line, knocking down 14-of-26 shots from long range to fuel the team's highest scoring output of the season.

It was the program's first playoff win since a 40-39 win over La Vernia in 2013-14 and pushed Bandera on to the area round for a matchup against El Campo Friday night.

The Bulldogs hung with the Ricebirds for the majority of the first three quarters Friday night but struggled to match their shooting effort from the first round as El Campo eventually pulled away in the fourth quarter. The Ricebirds defeated Bandera 59-43 to advance to the regional quarterfinals against No. 9 ranked Stafford, while the Bulldogs finish the year 20-16 as Bi-District Champions and Area Finalists for the first time in nearly a decade.

Monday night, it was the trio of Kayden Brown, Eli Salas and Alex Dirck that paved the way for a big Bandera win. Brown finished with 18 points, six rebounds and four steals while going 6-of-9 from the 3-point line and Salas chipped in 18 points, six assists and three rebounds while

going 3-of-6 from long range and a perfect 5- of-5 from the free throw line.

Dirck stepped up in a big way, posting a double-double with 14 points, 12 rebounds and two assists.

Isaac Segura made a huge impact off the bench, contributing seven points and seven rebounds, while Cale Barnett had six points and three rebounds.

Gavin Ortiz finished with six points and two steals, and Noah Barnett chipped in three points and three assists for the Bulldogs.

Bandera led by as many as 19 points over Cuero in the second half before the Gobblers started to chip into the lead and make things close down the stretch. But clutch 3-point shots from Brown, Salas and Cale Barnett helped to seal the win. Bandera also went 8- of-11 from the free throw line while the Gobblers were 8-of-19 from the charity stripe.

Friday was a different story offensively for the Bulldogs as El Campo's size, speed and athleticism impacted Bandera's ability to play comfortably on offense. The Bulldogs maintained pace in the first half and trailed by just three at the break, but turnovers and missed opportunities allowed the Ricebirds to build a larger lead late in the third quarter. When the lead reached 10 points, El Campo was able to go to a slow-paced stall tactic that forced the Bulldogs out of their zone defense, and the Ricebirds did just enough offensively to seal the deal down the stretch.

El Campo secured 19 offensive rebounds and had 30 points in the paint while Bandera, after shooting 54% from 3-point range against Cuero, knocked down just 17% (4-of-23) of its 3-point shots against the Ricebirds.

While it was a disappointing end to a tremendous season, the Bulldogs have plenty to be proud of in what was an historic year for the boys basketball program. Bandera hoisted a gold-ball trophy for the first time since 2013-2014, defeated a Class 6A program for the first time in school history (48-44 over Edinburg) and finished with a winning record in district play (7-5) for the first time since 2014-2015. Bandera also finished with back-to-back 20-win seasons for just the second time since

2013-2015.

The Bulldogs will return two starters from this year's team, sophomore Eli Salas and junior Alex Dirck, and have several rotational players returning who are eager to step up and fill a key role next season. The Bandera JV team finished with a winning record at 12-11 and the freshmen team was just one game below .500 at 11-12, leaving plenty to look forward to in the coming years for the basketball program.

I'm extremely proud of our kids for achieving their goal of winning a playoff game this year. It was the result of hundreds of hours of extra work in the off-season that most people aren't aware of. These guys committed to getting in the gym all spring, summer and fall. They woke up before 6 a.m. to get shots up before school during football season.

They gave up weekends in the summer to play together. That hard work paid off and I'm so happy they got to experience that success together.

This was a special group that was a a lot of fun to be around, and I'll always remember them for that. They will also always remember the support they got from our community—it was awesome to have such a packed gym for both of our playoff games, and it created an atmosphere that was a lot of fun to play in.

We will miss this group of seniors a ton, a few of them battled through some severe injuries just to get back on their court with their teammates, and that says a lot about them. They set the tone for what it takes to be successful, and our underclassmen can look to that example as they continue in their high school careers. I love these guys and can't wait to see the success they have after graduating in the spring, and I'm looking forward to continuing to build on this foundation with our returning players.

Box scores

Bandera 72, Cuero 62

Cuero	10	14	17	21	—	62
Bandera	18	17	18	19	—	72

Bandera scoring: Brown, 18, Salas, 18, Dirck ,14, Segura, 7, Ortiz, 6, Cale Barnett, 6, Noah Barnett, 3

El Campo 59, Bandera 43

El Campo	13	17	15	14	—	59
Bandera	9	17	9	8	—	43

Bandera scoring: Brown, 14, Salas, 8, Ortiz, 7, Dirck, 4, Segura, 4, Noah Barnett, 3, Corben Gonzales, 2, Cale Barnett, 1