

PREP BOYS BASKETBALL

Docks helps Hornets shake off past heartbreak

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EAST LANSING — As Mason Docks celebrated a state championship with teammates on the Breslin Center floor Saturday night, he was exactly where he wanted to be.

When the senior guard returned to Williamston this school year after being in Houston for a year because of his father’s job, he envisioned ending his career with a state championship.

And to see what he pictured become reality with the top-ranked Hornets’ 68-65 overtime victory over second-ranked Grand Rapids Catholic Central brought relief to Docks.

“(We’re) very satisfied,” Docks said after scoring a team-high 27 points. “This is what we’ve been working for all season and what we’ve been dreaming about. All the unfinished business — it’s taken care of now. It all came true. It’s just a crazy feeling right now. I don’t even know if it has all hit me yet. You can’t beat it.”

Unfinished business has been a constant theme for Docks and teammates throughout the season. And it has stemmed from a 2020 state tournament run the Hornets never got to experience with COVID-19 halting the season in the middle of district play.

Williamston was 20-2 in that 2020 season and thought it had a team capable of doing something special with Docks and Jay Wallace as key players. Not getting that chance stuck with Docks and teammates.

Docks also saw from afar how Williamston’s season ended in disappointment last season with a regional finals loss to Battle Creek Pennfield on its home court.

So when Docks returned, the Hornets were optimistic they could take care of things on the court with a veteran group.

“We were sticking with all these teams in summer league and just to hear that news (of Mason’s return) — it was



Williamston’s Mason Docks scored 27 points in the win Division 2 state title game. NICK KING/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

written in stars,” Williamston senior Max Burton said.

Docks, who will continue his career at University of Maryland, Baltimore County, shined under the bright Breslin Center lights to help the Hornets get their dream ending and complete a perfect season. He averaged 23.0 points during the championship weekend and shot 53% from the field.

Docks connected on 6 of 8 3-pointers during the championship win over GRCC, which included hitting the 3 that put Williamston ahead for good during the middle stages of overtime.

Docks’ shooting display, combined with a 23-point outing from Burton, helped Williamston cap its season with

a 27-0 mark and its first state championship since 1940.

Williamston coach Tom Lewis said Docks’ performance was what he and staff have been prodding him to deliver over the last third of the season.

“We knew we were going to need a performance like this at some point (from Mason),” Lewis said.

“When he hit those first couple — he’s electric. When he hits his deep 3s, he’s really tough to guard and then he can get to the hoop and then he can assist and hit free throws. It was big and we needed that big performance.”

It came at the perfect time with the Hornets facing their toughest test in defending state champion Grand Rapids

Catholic Central, who played Williamston to just its second game decided by less than 10 points all season.

“I knew in my mind we were going to win it all (with Mason),” Wallace said. “He is the best player that I’ve ever played with and I’ve been playing with him since I was in sixth grade. Not only does he do great things on the court, but he makes all of his teammates better. I’ve been playing AAU with him for a very long time and I’m thankful I met him and his dad and was able to play with him because it has made me a much better basketball player as well.”

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Williamston

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people will remember forever,” Lewis said. “They took some heavy punches. Most teams would have a hard time pulling that game out. My guys had just enough counterpunch to get that done. I really don’t have the words to say how proud I am of my entire team.”

The win completed a perfect and dominant season for the Hornets, who won 25 of their 27 games by double figures to finish as the best in Division 2. Williamston became the first program from Greater Lansing to win a state title since Pewamo-Westphalia won the Division 3 crown in 2019.

And the Hornets are the first area

program to win a title in Division 2/Class B since Sexton in 2012.

“This whole experience does not feel real,” said Williamston senior Jay Wallace, who had 10 points and eight rebounds. “I want someone to pinch me. I’ve been dreaming of this my whole life and it feels really good because of how hard this team worked, how hard I’ve worked and how hard my family has worked.

“This team, we’re not just teammates. We are family.”

Mason Docks had a team-high 27 points, which included the go-ahead 3 in the middle stages of overtime to lead Williamston. Max Burton added 23 points and seven rebounds for the Hornets before fouling out in late in the extra period.

Kaden Brown had a game-high 33

points for Grand Rapids Catholic Central, which missed a potential tying 3-pointer as time expired to set off a celebration on the court for Williamston

“That shot felt like 30 seconds rather than 2,” Burton said. “As soon as we saw it went out and no fouls were called, it didn’t feel real yet. It took 20, to even 30, minutes to actually realize we won a state championship. It was a great feeling.”

Williamston led by as much as 16 during the second half before Grand Rapids Catholic Central (25-2) mounted a comeback. The Cougars gradually chipped away with Brown tying the game on two occasions during the late stages of regulation.

But the Hornets, who haven’t played in many close games all season, remained composed.

“Everyone was confident,” Docks said. “There was no doubt at all. If we had doubt, we probably would have lost.”

And Williamston completed the final part of its mission thanks to big baskets late from Docks and Burton. And now the Hornets will be remembered just like those champions from 1940.

Docks said the photo Lewis placed on the court before they boarded the bus served as motivation for he and teammates to be the next Williamston team remembered for being champions.

“I just told my guys right before that picture (that) dreams come true,” Lewis said. “Dreams do come true.”

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Couch

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community, this is obviously a ginormous deal, to be cherished and commemorated by banners and road signs and in Williamston lore.

And in the era of school choice, the ramifications could be lasting in other ways — like Williamston being seen as a basketball power and destination school by area kids.

But this accomplishment goes beyond Williamston. The 27-0 Hornets became just the 28th boys basketball team in the Lansing area to ever win a state championship and just the 17th in the state’s top two classes. More significantly, perhaps, this Williamston squad is one of only six in the area to win a state title in the Michigan High School Athletic Association’s top two classes since 1983 and the first to do it in a decade, since Sexton’s back-to-back Class B titles in 2011 and ’12.

The other three, all in Class A: Holt in 2005, Everett in 2004 and Waverly in 2000.

You don’t have to win a state championship to have been a great team. But it’s so hard to do — especially at the upper levels — that it’s never a fluke. Good teams can sometimes go a long ways with a favorable path, occasionally all the way to the semifinals at Breslin Center and, once in a while, to the state title game. But if you’re the last team standing, you’ve beaten somebody truly legit at some point. That’s what Williamston

did in taking down Grand Rapids Catholic, in a game the Hornets controlled for a long while and then won in overtime.

It was only the second time all season Williamston didn’t win by double digits. It beat a previously unbeaten Freeland team by 20 in the semifinals Friday night.

Also, consider that Williamston’s run happened in what is often the best class/division these days. So many of the great urban programs have been decimated by school choice, meaning they no longer play in Division 1 (or Class A, formerly). Detroit Pershing, for example, has 447 kids and is now Division 2, like Williamston. Same for Saginaw High and Saginaw Arthur Hill. You get the point. Division 1 isn’t the almighty title it once was.

A program like Williamston is both helped and challenged by this dynamic — benefiting from school choice on its roster, but less so in the state tournament.

The unanswerable question now is: Where does this team rank among the greats in modern Lansing area history? Let’s stop short of the Magic Johnson and Sam and Jay Vincents era and keep it in the last 30-plus years.

The Sexton teams of a decade ago are probably No. 1 — with five Division I players (Denzel Valentine, Bryn Forbes, Anthony Clemmons, Jalen Hayes and Trevor Manuel), four of them playing high-major basketball, two of them making it to the NBA, and Hayes becoming a heckuva player at Oakland and still playing at a high level professionally overseas.

The 2000 Waverly state title team with Marcus Taylor, Cortney Scott and Melvin White is in the discussion, too. Same for the 2004 Everett state championship squad starring Derick Nelson and Goran Suton. And we shouldn’t sleep on the 2005 Holt state title team with Muhammad El-Amin, the late Paul Crosby and Co.

There are others that were supremely talented, but didn’t quite get there or ran into a roadblock — another great team in the area or state. Remember, for years, there was no seeding at all in Michigan high school basketball. No. 1-ranked Sexton played No. 5-ranked Okemos in the first round of the Class A districts in 1994. That sort of thing happened regularly until recently and, even now, seeding is only done at the district level. So a state title isn’t everything.

A great example of this is 2011. An Eastern team — with LaDontae Henton, Cha Cha Tucker, Fredrick “Boo Man” Edmond and Brian Morton — split with eventual Class B champ Sexton during the regular season, beat a talented Okemos team in the district final by two points and then lost to eventual Class A state champion Kalamazoo Central by a single bucket in the regionals in Kalamazoo. That Eastern group, pound for pound, stacks up with just about any team that’s come through this area in a long while.

But Williamston can only really be judged against other state champions now. These Hornets have earned that. They were a terrific collection of talent — guard Mason Docks and big man Max Burton are both on their way to Division

I programs on scholarship, forward Jay Wallace is headed to Toledo as a preferred walk-on, and guard Spencer Feig has opportunities to play college ball, as well — and they were marvelously connected, in the way many gifted teams aren’t. That’s part of it. This isn’t a contest of individual talent, though the Hornets had plenty of that.

They’d stack up just fine against those other five upper-division state champs from this area. And they, too, are now forever part of this area’s high school basketball lore.

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GAMEPLAN

Baseball

1 p.m.	MLB: Spring Training, N.Y. Yankees vs. Detroit	Bally Sports Detroit
4 p.m.	MLB: Spring Training, Texas vs. Seattle	MLB Network
9 p.m.	MLB: Spring Training, Chicago Cubs vs. Cincinnati	MLB Network

Basketball

7 p.m.	Women’s NCAA Tournament: Elite Eight	ESPN
8 p.m.	NBA: Golden State at Memphis	NBATV
9 p.m.	Women’s NCAA Tournament: Elite Eight	ESPN

Hockey

7 p.m.	NHL: Carolina at Washington	NHL Network
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