

View Park ends Valley Torah's state championship run

By Ashley Zeldin, Contributing Writer | PUBLISHED Mar 15, 2011 | Sports

Nathaniel Liberman played through muscle cramps in both legs on Thursday night, but he couldn't overcome them. And neither could Valley Torah overcome a fourth-quarter comeback by View Park, falling 69-68, as the Knights slayed the Wolfpack's hopes of a California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) Division 5 state championship in the quarterfinal round on March 10.

Valley Torah won the Southern Section Division 6AA championship on March 5, making it the first Jewish school to win the CIF title. The Wolfpack went on to a 58-50 win over Calvin Christian of Escondido in the first round of the statewide CIF Division 5 basketball tournament at Los Angeles Valley College on March 8.

On Thursday, 6-foot-4 sophomore guard Nathaniel Liberman, usually in the 6-foot-9 shadow of older brother Aaron, emerged as the future of this Valley Torah team, scoring 18 points—all but two in the first half.

“Thank God my shot was falling and it put us up,” said Nathaniel Liberman, whose first four shots fell from three-point range. He fell to the court clutching his left leg with just over a minute left in the third quarter, and valiantly returned halfway through the fourth quarter after receiving treatment on the sideline. He was back only a minute before his right leg gave out.

“I tried to maybe get another shot in, keep us up, but my legs couldn't take it,” he said.

Natanel Tzion led the Wolfpack with 20 points, Aaron Liberman contributed 16 points while constantly double-teamed under the basket and Yosef Grundman added 13.

“I let my team down the last two games, so I wanted to come out here and show the fans, my team, my coaches, that I am who I am, that I can lead, that I can score,” said Tzion, who had been held to a combined six points in Valley Torah’s previous two games.

Junior guard Sheldon Wright scored a game-high 31 points for View Park, 25 of which came in the second half.

“The kids [from Valley Torah] are tremendous. They played up today,” said Don Turner, the Knights’ first-year coach. “We just got a little more lucky at the end. That was really the only difference.”

With 1:36 on the clock, Grundman slapped his hands against the floor, symbolic of locking down on defense. Valley Torah then proceeded to give up consecutive perimeter shots by the Knights’ Wright, who single-handedly sparked View Park’s return from 14 points behind.

“We were one or two plays away from the win,” Valley Torah coach Robert Icart said. “We just got caught up in this emotional ride.”

After Aaron Liberman picked up a controversial fourth foul with 4.6 seconds left, Wright made both free throws to go ahead by one. Grundman took the ensuing inbound pass, driving down the court while heavily guarded and putting up a desperation shot. The senior center was there for the potential winning tip, but mistimed the jump.

But critical turnovers and missed free throws were the real difference.

Aaron Liberman missed all four first-half free throws, though he hit five of six in the second half. Grundman missed a free throw on the Wolfpack's second-last possession after completing a three-point play on the previous possession.

“We had high expectations. We played our hearts out, and we came up short, but we’ll hold our heads up high,” Tzion said. “We made history.”

Valley Torah finishes its historic season with 25 wins against 5 losses; though its season isn't over quite yet.

In two weeks the Wolfpack will travel to New York to compete in the 20th annual Red Sarachek Tournament at the Yeshiva University against other elite Jewish schools from across the country.

“We’re going to regroup,” Icart said. “The YU championship was in the plan, in God’s plan and in our plan.

“We built something bigger than basketball. We built a sense of pride. We’ve accomplished a lot and we still have something more to accomplish.”

And Nathaniel Liberman is looking forward to building on this season next year.

“I’m going to take this loss, focus my anger and sadness, and hopefully I can take next year’s team farther,” he said.