

Montclair Immaculate girls basketball pulls off upset, spoils Marist's home finale

Updated Mar 05, 2020; Posted Mar 05, 2020



Immaculate Conception's Nasira Williams moves the ball during the second half of the Essex county girls basketball final at West Orange High School on February 22, 2020. Alexandra Pais | For NJ Advance Media

By Brandon Gould | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

The lead was slipping away.

Everything that seemed to be going so right for sixth-seeded Montclair Immaculate started to go wrong in a hurry. Third-seeded Marist was in a groove and wasn't slowing down, knowing very well that this could be the final game on its home court before the school closes at the end of the year.

At the beginning of the fourth quarter, Marist evened the score.

A 14-point Montclair Immaculate lead had evaporated.

It was gut check time, and **Nasira Williams** knew it when she received a pass from **Tahirah Kelley**. The senior let a shot fly and everyone held their breath before it landed through the middle of the hoop and gave Montclair Immaculate the lead back for good in an upset, 64-57, in the North, Non-Public B quarterfinals.

On Saturday, the Lions will host seventh-seeded Morris Catholic in the sectional semis. It will be a great opportunity. Montclair Immaculate, however, is well aware of the hard work it took to hold off Marist.

"To be honest, it was a little horrifying," senior **Azatah Lawrence** said of Marist's second-half

comeback attempt. "We got together and talked to each other and took a deep breath. We just needed to relax at that point and play the way we knew we could play."

Montclair Immaculate went on an 11-3 run after Marist tied the game with a 14-1 run that started in the third quarter and spilled over into the fourth.

Williams, Kelley, Bukky Akinsola and Olivia Wooten all stepped up during that stretch and helped Montclair Immaculate seal the deal.

Akinsola, Kelley, Lawrence and Williams all finished with double-digit points.

Lawrence scored a team-high 16 points and grabbed 10 rebounds, while Kelley and Williams came through with 13 points. Akinsola chipped in with 12 points and was also one of the key pieces of a defensive effort that forced Marist into 14 turnovers.

Lawrence and Williams came into this year as the foundation for the Lions.

Montclair Immaculate also welcomed Akinsola, Kelley and Wooten as transfers, giving the Essex County team even more talent to work with. Kelley had to sit out the first 30 days, but since she's joined the lineup, Montclair Immaculate has been one of the best teams in the state.

"It feels like we're whole now and we're one complete team," Lawrence said. "I have all my sisters out there now and it feels great. There are people who don't believe we can play, so it's great to prove to them and prove to ourselves that we can really create history."

It's been 29 years since Montclair Immaculate last won a sectional title.

The Lions made a run last year under former St. Rose coach **Joe Whalen**, but fell short against Saddle River Day in the semifinals. Montclair Immaculate will have a chance to take things one step further this winter under the guidance of first-year coach **Jimmy Kreie**, who was previously an assistant at Newark Tech. Montclair Immaculate (20-8) came in as a lower seed in the bracket, but after playing the schedule it played in the regular season, the Lions are confident that they can make a serious championship push.

"We have so many weapons and we can have anyone score the ball, steal the ball or get rebounds," said Williams. "We knew all year that this is what we were aiming for and we knew we'd get here. The schedule

Montclair Immaculate girls basketball pulls off upset, spoils Marist's home finale

Updated Mar 05, 2020; Posted Mar 05, 2020

wasn't made for us to go 24-0. We played those games to get ready for states."

.