

Chieftains put 'pedal to floor' in win

By Fred Costello

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It seems unlikely for a basketball team to consider the second game of the regular season a "must-win," but that's how Utica approached Tuesday night's Macomb Area Conference boys crossover battle with visiting Romeo. The Chieftains earned their first victory of the season, 54-43, providing a sense of relief for coach Gerry Kraemer.

Boys High School Basketball

"It was good for the kids to come out and defend home court," Kraemer said. "I thought we took a huge step forward as a program today."

Utica evened its overall record at 1-1, while the Bulldogs have yet to earn a win and are 0-2

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to start the year.

Sophomore guard Mighael Hollingsworth scored a game-high 14 points to pace Utica. He, along with senior guard Derek Nichols (7 points), made a bevy of explosive passes that kept the Romeo defense at bay the entire game. The Chieftains got eight points apiece from junior forwards Connor Hinebaugh and Dave Idziak.

Senior guard Ryan Grzegorzewski scored 12 points to lead Romeo. Senior guard Ryan Thomas scored 11 points on the night and senior forward Jason Schirmer scored 10.

Perhaps the most telling statistic of the evening, however, was the rebounding disparity. Utica grabbed 22 more rebounds than the Bulldogs, leading to several extended possessions. It was one of many vexing sights for coach Dale Teller.

"Right now, the rebounding is killing us," Teller said. "We're getting hammered on the boards. We're just not playing well. Whether we turn it around or not, who knows?"

Kraemer also pointed to rebounding as a telling stat – and a sign that his team has started making corrections early in the season.

"We were out-rebounded in the first game and we're really making a concerted effort to get physical on the boards," Kraemer said. "It was a physical game tonight and it's good that we came away with the win. We can learn from that."

Though the final score might tell otherwise, Romeo actually fought back in the fourth quarter. A Hollingsworth 3-ball at the end of the third quarter opened a 41-27 lead for Utica. The Bulldogs got some life moments later when Schirmer nailed

back-to-back 3-pointers, cutting the lead to 43-39 with about five and a half minutes to play.

Utica answered right back.

Hollingsworth rose to the occasion again two possessions later, snapping the nylon for his second 3-pointer that put his team ahead, 48-40, with 2:52 to go.

Kraemer was impressed with the poise shown by his young guard.

"We've been working with Mighael on leadership and we thought that was something he did the last four or five games last year," Kraemer said. "He's stepped it up."

After a close first quarter, Utica started to pull away in the second.

Employing lightning-quick ball movement, the Chieftains had their way with the Romeo defense, generating many open looks at the basket. Idziak canned a 3-pointer in the opening minutes of the second quarter, giving Utica a 21-15 advantage. They eventually built a 31-22 halftime advantage.

It was a game in which a lot went right for Utica. According to at least one Chieftains player, there was a lot of pride on the line after a 12-point season-opening home loss to Ford last week.

"After coming out flat against Ford, we knew we had to win one on our home court," Nichols said. "We knew Romeo was a tough team and that we'd have to come out intense, determined and focused to win. That's what happened; we jumped on them and kept the pedal to the floor."

Romeo	13	9	5	16	-	43
Utica	16	15	10	13	-	54

ROMEO (0-2): Spencer Szejcik 5, Jason Schirmer 10, Ryan Grzegorzewski 12, Ryan Thomas 11, Nate Fraeyman 5. Totals: 15 (3) 9-15 43.

UTICA (1-1): Mighael Hollingsworth 14, Connor Hinebaugh 8, Robbie Korthals 2, Trevor Plizga 7, Derek Nichols 7, Andrew Thompson 6, Dave Idziak 8, Andrew Bommarito 2. Totals: 19 (6) 11-14 54.