

## Lauderdale County (26-5): Be a Small Part of Something Big



Photo Courtesy: Bo Starkey/Average Joe's Sports Talk

Lauderdale County is back in the final four, but its boys, not the girls. A rarity in Rogersville, but they are still all on board. Coach Whitney Owens and his team have run through this entire season only losing to a Final Four team, an Elite Eight team, and a Sweet 16 team in Deshler, East Lawrence, and Brooks, respectively. The common trend is all above 3A.

One key to their run is that he has tried to keep it as normal and calm for the guys. "To not make it too big," said Coach Owens. He then attributed how loose his guys have been and noted how they may have played two of their better games there. His message to the guys will be "Keep playing hard. Keep playing loose."

The Lauderdale County boys have not been to the Final Four since the 2020 season. So no current player has experienced this so far. However, they shot 45% or better in both games at regionals. Coach Owens attributed that to practicing at different gyms before they got to Wallace, such as UAH, Athens High School, and more, to get different looks. They are going to practice at Samford on Monday to get a different look before the arena. He then attributed that to the guys getting open shots. "We're one of those teams if we see it go in early, then we will hit a lot of shots," he also added.

This year's boys team is similar to last season's girls team at Lauderdale County as it is not all on one person to carry the team. Numerous guys have scored 10+ points per game and led the team in scoring each night. Calvin Watkins, Jayden Sears, Easton Hammell, Connor May, Asa Butler, and more. "It's a blessing to have more than one that can score because when the target is on one guy, and you've got to get him going it adds pressure."

We talked to Jayden Sears, Calvin Watkins, and Connor May as well. "It feels good to be in the final four, not a lot of freshmen make it this far," said Jayden. Connor added that he does his part "just doing what you gotta do." Calvin echoed Connor in saying Coach kept saying "do what you do." Jayden noted he expected to win, but not as badly as they did. Calvin said, "Coach said the only team in our way was us. They all three added that there was no extra excitement in beating a local team.

Despite the impressive record, it becomes more impressive when you realize they have beaten Brooks as well. The only two they played twice were Brooks and Deshler. They lost to Deshler by one and by three. So in theory, they got one of the losses back versus Brooks. "It helps to play good competition," said Coach Owens. They had a chance to win both games against Deshler. "You have to be in those tight situations to learn how to finish games," he also added.

Rogersville loves basketball. "They love the girls, they love the guys," said Coach Owens. "I wish we were both there this year. Coach (Carla) Clemons was one of the first ones to see me after the game and congratulate me." He also added. It has also come full circle for Coach Owens now, from playing for Lauderdale County, to being an assistant coach, to being the head coach, and in the Final Four. "I'm blessed to have an opportunity to coach these guys and have an opportunity to play in the final four.

One special element of this team is the family angle. Coach Owens has one son on the team, Brady Owens (junior), and his wife, Melia, does the book for the team. "It's a family deal when you are a coach...we're in the gym together, and we're at home together, so we see a lot of each other. We're all in this together. My wife has been there since day one, she's been the bookkeeper since I started coaching...You could not ask for more." Coach Owens said. Coach Owens also added that he has coached the juniors since they were in kindergarten.

That is not the only family connection for the boys' team. The other is assistant coach Brett Sinyard (son of the late Coach Larry Sinyard). Coach Larry Sinyard is now the namesake for the gym at Lauderdale County. Coach Larry Sinyard passed in 2021, but Brett is hoping to add to the legacy of the Sinyard name with his own championship ring. Brett's nieces, Madison and Kenzie Mobley, were on the 2025 Girls Championship team. Brett's sister, Alana Mobley, nee Sinyard, was on the 1998 Championship team, coached by Coach Larry Sinyard.

Oh wait, there is one more Assistant Coach Weston Bowling is the half brother of Mars Hill girls player Evan Ann Bowling. Very cool experience Tuesday for them to get to be a part of the final four together as well.

This run began last season, though for Lauderdale County. They lost in the area tournament to Rogers and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2016. “That was a rally cry that night. I told them all you guys in this room. We’re going to make a run in the next few years. There are people in this room that will have the opportunity to play in the final four. Maybe win a state championship.....Buy into being a small part of something big,” Coach Owens told the team after the area loss to Rogers.

Coach Owens then attributed the success of the other programs and how it spills over to other programs. “When we start football in August, and they have a good run, it carries the whole year,” said Coach Owens. He then added how when you start doesn't matter as much as when you end it. “No one remembers the start of the season; they remember the end.”

Montgomery Academy is the opponent for Lauderdale County. They won 3A boys last season but lost a lot of size from that team. Coach Owens said if they can defend and get open shots, they (Lauderdale County) will have a chance. However, Lauderdale has multiple scorers, and they all hope to be a small part of something big.

Zack Pounders

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