

A team needs its seniors to lead the way at tournament time. Sophia Peppers and Kealey Nelson did just that for Exira/Elk Horn-Kimballton.

Peppers scored 24 points and grabbed nine rebounds and Nelson added 18 points and eight rebounds as the seventh-ranked Spartans beat No. 8 AGWSR 57-47 to reach the Class 1A semifinals for the third time in the last four years.

They're the only seniors in the starting lineup for Exira/EHK and both also were steady at the free throw line. Peppers, who is difficult to contain when she gets the ball near the basket, sank 14 of 16 free throws, while Nelson went 6-for-8 at the line.

AGWSR had two more field goals in the game, but Exira/EHK held a 21-7 edge in free throws.

Mandy Willems led AGWSR with 14 points in her final high school game. She'll play at North Iowa Area Community College next season. Taryan Barrick and Rachel Sicard each scored eight points for the Cougars, who returned to the state tournament for the first time since winning the 1A title in 2009.

As might be expected in a game matching teams so close together in the rankings, the lead seesawed throughout. From the second quarter on, the lead changed hands seven times and there were six ties, the last at 43 when AGWSR's Alyssa Hames made a layup with 4:28 left.

The Spartans regained the lead when Peppers rebounded her own miss and turned it into a three-point play and they pulled away from there. Nelson's steal and layup made it 48-43, she sank a free throw about a minute later and Peppers hit two more at the line.

That made it 51-43 and all the Spartans had to do after that was make their free throws. They did, sinking six of eight in the final 1:38.

Exira/EHK will take a 24-1 record against top-ranked Springville in the next round at 1:30 p.m. Friday. AGWSR finishes 21-3.