

After losing in last year's state championship game, Audi Crooks and the Bishop Garrigan Golden Bears are getting another chance.

Top-ranked Bishop Garrigan pulled away after a first-quarter tie and rolled to a 57-35 victory over short-handed Exira/Elk Horn-Kimballton in the Class 1A semifinals. Bishop Garrigan improved to 25-1 and will try for its first state championship at 6:30 p.m. Saturday. The Golden Bears lost to Newell-Fonda 65-63 in last year's finals. Fourth-ranked Exira/EHK faced a major challenge from the outset, with no one taller than 5-feet-11 to face the 6-foot-3 Crooks and only seven completely healthy players.

Still, the Spartans managed a 9-9 tie after one quarter before Bishop Garrigan went on a 13-1 run to take control and hand Exira/EHK its first loss.

Crooks, just a sophomore, scored 17 points, pulled down 18 rebounds and blocked seven shots in the type of dominating performance that has come to define her career. She's a handful by herself, but the Golden Bears also got solid games from perimeter players Molly Joyce and Kaylyn Meyers.

Joyce, also a sophomore, scored 17 points, handed out three assists and made two steals. Meyers, a senior, also had three assists and two steals while scoring 10 points. The Spartans' best chance would have been to make some outside shots and they couldn't get nearly enough to fall, going 3-for-23 from 3-point range and shooting 27 percent overall.

Mollie Rasmussen led Exira/EHK with nine points, Quinn Grubbs scored eight and Mollie Rasmussen had six. Coach Tom Petersen was able to get senior Tatum Grubbs, who suffered a midseason ACL injury, into the game and she knocked down a 3-pointer and made a layup after a steal. Petersen called a timeout with 10 seconds left to get her out of the game and gave her a long hug as the Spartans' fans applauded.

Crooks scored on putbacks, lob passes and short turnaround jumpers in making 7-of-12 shots. She got the Golden Bears' fastbreak going with outlet passes, including one to Joyce, who finished the break with a spinning layup. Moments later, Crooks swatted away a shot to trigger another break that Joyce finished.

Exira/EHK, making its fifth state tournament appearance, finish 24-1.