

Maquoketa Valley survived a nerve-racking finish to earn a berth in the Class 2A championship game.

Ella Imler sank two free throws with 6 seconds left to break a tie and the top-ranked Wildcats kept Nodaway Valley from getting a final shot to escape with a 47-45 semifinal victory in a tense matchup of unbeaten teams.

Imler got trapped in a double team along the sideline as Maquoketa Valley worked for a final shot, but she got hit on the arm and swished both free throws.

After two timeouts, Nodaway Valley got the ball in the frontcourt after the Wildcats tipped a long inbound pass. The Wolverines put the ball in play with 4.5 seconds remaining but could not take a shot before the buzzer sound and Maquoketa Valley celebrated its first trip to the state finals since finishing second in the 2003 2A tournament.

Emerson Whittenbaugh led Maquoketa Valley with 19 points. She missed badly on her first two shots, then made eight in a row and finished 8-for-12. Imler ended up with nine points, Taya Tucker had nine points and six rebounds and Carissa Sabers scored six.

A key for Maquoketa was the defense on Nodaway Valley's leading scorer, Maddax DeVault, in the second half. DeVault scored 13 points in the first half, but Maquoketa Valley sophomore Kennedy Rausch face-guarded her all over the floor in the second half and held her to two shots and two points. DeVault got those points on a breakaway layup after a steal.

Lindsey Davis added 11 points for the Wolverines, Lexi Shike scored eight and Corinne Bond had six points and eight rebounds. Macy Kuhns handed out eight assists and converted a game-tying three-point play in the final minute.

Maquoketa Valley built a 36-26 lead with a 7-0 run early in the second half, then had to fight off Nodaway Valley the rest of the way. The Wolverines kept chipping away at the lead and finally tied it when the 5-foot-2 Kuhns was fouled as she scored on a drive to the basket and sank the free throw with 45 seconds left, setting up the frantic finish.

Maquoketa Valley will take a 25-0 record into the title game at 4 p.m. Saturday. Nodaway Valley, in the state tournament for the first time, finished 24-1.