

Ballard's stifling, in-your-face defense has taken the Bombers another step on the road to the state championship game.

The second-ranked Bombers shut down a veteran Harlan team and got enough offense for a 38-27 victory in the Class 4A quarterfinals. Three quick steals at the start of the third quarter fueled an 8-0 run that erased Harlan's 14-13 halftime lead and sent Ballard to its 22nd victory against only one loss.

Ballard, in the state tournament for the 15th time, won the Class 3A title in 2009, the last time the Bombers reached the state finals. Their next step is a semifinal game at 8 p.m. on Thursday.

Molly Ihle led Ballard with 12 points, including seven free throws in the final 2 1/2 minutes to secure the victory. Josie Fleischmann scored seven points for the Bombers, while Meg Rietz had six points and eight rebounds. Reserve Sydney Briggs contributed six points on 3-for-4 shooting and three steals, while Brooke Loewe had three steals and five points.

Ballard finished with nine steals in all and blocked seven shots as part of the defensive effort that frustrated the ninth-ranked Cyclones, who came in averaging 60 points a game. Ballard is giving up only 28 points a game and just two opponents have reached 40.

Claire Schmitz led Harlan with 11 points and 11 rebounds. The Cyclones, who have won two state titles, reached the state tournament for the 14th time and finished 17-6. Ballard got things going in the second half when Loewe's steal set up a Fleischmann 3-pointer that put the Bombers up 16-14. Fleischmann scored on a layup 16 seconds later after Cassidy Thompson's steal and Loewe swiped the ball again and fed Ihle for a layup. Briggs' layup at the 4:13 mark finished the run, stretching the lead to 22-14. Harlan pulled to 24-20 when Macie Lienen spun around her defender and dropped in a layup for the first basket of the fourth quarter. But Ihle answered with a 3-pointer from deep in the left corner and the Bombers did the rest on free throws, making 11 of 15 in the final 3 minutes.