

Ballard's wait is over. The Bombers are back in the state championship game.

Relying on the defense that has carried them all year, the second-ranked Bombers recovered after losing an early 10-point lead and beat Dallas Center-Grimes 32-26 to finish the Class 4A semifinal round.

Ballard will play top-ranked Glenwood for the championship at 1:30 p.m. Saturday. It's the Bombers' first appearance in the state finals since they won the 2009 Class 3A championship with Hall of Famer Amanda Zimmerman. Ballard finished second in 3A in 2006, when Zimmerman was a freshman.

Brooke Loewe led Ballard with 13 points, including two free throws in the final minute when the Bombers were fighting off the Mustangs. She also had four of her team's 11 steals. Josie Fleischmann added 10 points and Molly Ihle contributed five points, five steals and a key rebound in the closing seconds.

Emma Miner led Dallas Center-Grimes with nine points, Julie Reis scored five and Alex Protzman had four points and six rebounds.

The game contrasted sharply to Ballard's 52-23 victory over the Mustangs in the season opener, though it looked like the Bombers were headed for another decisive win in the early going.

Their havoc-causing defense held Dallas Center-Grimes to on basket and forced six turnovers in the first quarter as Ballard grabbed a 10-2 lead. It was 12-2 before the Mustangs settled down and inched their way back into it.

They drew to 15-12 at halftime and pulled ahead 24-20 on Vanessa Bickford's 3-pointer near the end of the third quarter. Ihle's 3-pointer and Loewe's three-point play off a drive into the lane put Ballard back into the lead and the Bombers held Dallas Center-Grimes to just two free throws the rest of the way.

A big play came when the 5-foot-6 Ihle rebounded a Dallas Center-Grimes miss, was fouled and sank two free throws for a 28-24 lead with 57.3 seconds left. Loewe's two free throws and two more by Cassidy Thompson wrapped it for the Bombers, who advance with a 23-1 record. Dallas Center-Grimes had a 15-game winning streak end and finished 21-3.