



CLASS AAAAA STATE TOURNAMENT FINAL FOUR

No room for Rams

Wheeler halts Newton's charge in state semis

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DULUTH — Midnight fell on the Newton High School boys' basketball team Thursday night.

Flattened by a freight train, the Rams saw their charge stopped two wins shy of a state championship, bowing 78-50 to third-ranked Wheeler in the Class AAAAA State Tournament semifinals at the Gwinnett Center.

Newton's season ends at 21-10, but the 28-point defeat did little to mar the school's first Final Four appearance in 23 years.

"We had a great year, just an awesome year," Newton head coach Ron Bradley said. "For this group to be here ... it's just unbelievable."

Thoughts of an upset over a team that still has not lost inside state lines went up in flames in the second quarter as Wheeler outscored the Rams by a 20-2 margin. The Wildcats (30-1) led 35-10 at halftime, and the rout was on.

Newton missed 20 of its first 24 shots and never found a rhythm. Its pulse faded, then went dead altogether.

"We went elephant hunting with a pea shooter," Bradley said. "I thought they were one of the best teams one of our teams has ever played. You've got to give them credit."

Wheeler, which upset top-ranked South Gwinnett in the round of eight, is seeking its third state championship in four years and fourth since 1994. The Wildcats meet the Stephenson-Norcross winner at 8:15 p.m. today for the AAAAA crown at the Gwinnett Center.

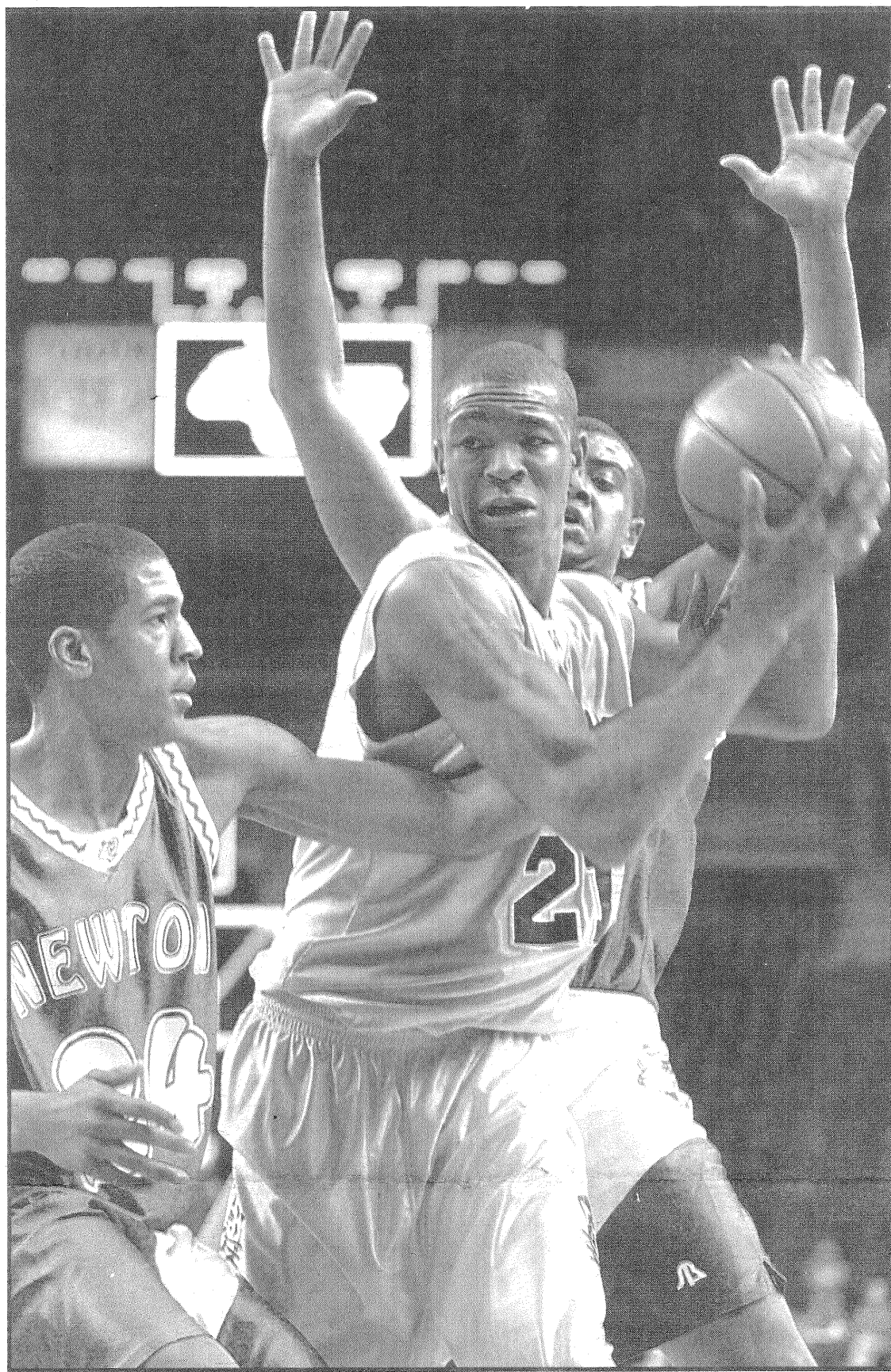
Twenty-nine of their 30 wins this season have come by 12 points or more.

"They're too good," Bradley said. "They just had too many guns for us."

Newton did what it could to slow the tempo but fell out of character when Wheeler tightened its defensive grip. The Wildcats scored 25 consecutive points during one first-half stretch, and the Rams could do nothing to stop them.

"We knew if we got behind we wouldn't be able to catch up," Bradley said. "We got away from what we wanted to do early. They got better and better, and we got worse and worse."

Todd Hoskins paced three Rams in double figures with 18 points but was a man by himself for most of the evening. Jerrell Boswell chipped in with 13 points (all in the second half), and Rudy Nolley added 10 points and seven rebounds.



Mandi Singer/The Covington News

Heat of battle: Wheeler's Chris Hanna (21) makes a move in the paint against Newton's Todd Hoskins, left, and John Monk. The Wildcats defeated the Rams 78-50 in the state semifinals Thursday.

INSIDE THE LINES

Wheeler's second-quarter run dooms Cinderella Rams

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DULUTH — Newton freshman Sean Monk calmly swished perimeter jumpers during half-time's shoot-around, smiling back at taunts from the stands, acknowledging tenacious Wheeler High School fans — who were both obnoxious and outnumbering — with a benign hand gesture that was probably much better than they deserved.

The Rams trailed by 25 at the

their composure was never in jeopardy.

Newton fans can thank their coach.

"[Wheeler] was just too good a basketball team to play the way we did tonight," said Newton head coach Ron Bradley, whose team's Cinderella run in the state playoffs was dashed in a 78-50 rout at the Gwinnett Center. "I felt like we had to control the ball if we had a prayer ... we needed to stay close to have a chance."

Newton's deliberate, slow-down

Wheeler squad early, as persistent perimeter passing and interior defense held Wheeler in check through much of the first quarter.

Consecutive baskets off turnovers late in the first, however, keyed a 25-0 run for Wheeler that forced Newton to succumb to an uncomfortable fast-break style of play, playing right into Wheeler's considerable strength.

The Rams couldn't keep up. "There's no way we could have kept up," said Bradley, whose team was outscored by just three points

ing to Wheeler's contagious style. "I don't think it's what they did, it's what we did. We can't blame anyone [but ourselves]."

After halftime, it was senior Todd Hoskins that put the Rams on his back, matching a mounting deficit with an equal tenacity, pouring in 18 points on several acrobatic shots, single-handedly keeping Wheeler interested in a game that had gotten out of hand.

The 28-point defeat was Newton's worst since it lost 61-32 to Mays in the first round of the state