

Sports

Road Warriors

Overcome 12-point deficit, road game to advance to Suffolk championship

By ANTHONY LIFRIERI

Call them the Comeback Kids. Northport boys' basketball overcame a 12 point deficit to defeat Longwood, 51-47, in the county semifinals, Friday February 22 at Longwood High School. The Tigers were led by senior point guard Matt Smith, who scored more than half his team's points.

Heading into the game, the Tigers were in a peculiar situation. Northport was the top seed in the playoffs while Longwood was seeded 12th. However, prior to the playoffs, Section XI, the governing body of Suffolk County high school athletics, scheduled the game for a neutral site, which worked out to be Longwood High School. This venue was not changed, giving the top seeded team in the county a road game against Longwood at Longwood High School.

"We joked around about it before the game," Northport coach Andrew D'Eloia said. "We were going to put Matt Smith on Luke Petrasek's shoulders and bring a tape measure to measure the basket."

Despite being in enemy territory, the Tigers were happy to be playing. "We're excited to be here, the venue doesn't matter," D'Eloia said. "We're not distracted, we just want to play."

Besides dealing with a road game, the Tigers had to take on a tough team in the Lions. "This is a team that can beat anyone," D'Eloia said. "We need to bring our 'A' game and 'D' up. We need to show defensive intensity for the entire game."

Even though Northport was on the road, a huge following of Northporters made it to the game, filling its side of the gym to beyond capacity and was ready to make its presence felt. Longwood fans filled its side of the gym as well, and both sides chanted at each other from before the start of the game to the end in a competition more intense than the game itself. The crowd was so loud, the singer of the National Anthem had the conclusion of her song drowned out by deafening cheers.

Northport got off to a slow start in the game, giving up 18 points in the first quarter. However, Smith was able to keep his team in the game. The senior was able to score all eight of Northport's points to keep the deficit at ten points.

Longwood increased its lead to 12 points at the start of the second quarter before senior guard Thomas Kennedy picked up an offensive rebound, then hit a three-point shot to cut the Lions' lead to 20-11 with 6:49 remaining in the first half. The three-pointer sparked a 10-2 run capped off by an acrobatic shot from under the basket by Smith to cut the deficit to 22-18.

With its lead slipping away, the Lions answered back with an 8-0 run of its own to extend its lead back to a dozen. With time running out, the Tigers worked the ball to Milligan, who

hit a clutch three-pointer to knock the deficit back down to single-digits, 30-21, heading into halftime while galvanizing his team.

"Coach called my number. We knew a three would carry us through the game," Milligan said. "We all do every little thing we can to help the team because every little thing piles up to a win."

The second half was a game of a methodical chip-away. Smith scored the Tigers' first six points of the period to make the score 35-27 with 4:35 remaining in the third period. Trailing 37-29, Smith came up with a steal and coast-to-coast layup, followed by a three-pointer with 2:12 left in the quarter to cut Longwood's lead down to 39-34.

Smith's three-pointer also gave the Northport crowd new life, and it resumed its loud and boisterous cheering. A circus layup by Milligan and a defensive stand by the Tigers at the end of the period insured the Tigers were trailing only 41-36 heading into the final eight minutes of regulation.

Early in the fourth quarter, Kennedy subbed in and the Tigers quickly made use of him. On Northport's first possession of the period, Smith drove to the basket then kicked it out to Kennedy who drained a clutch three-pointer to cut the deficit to just two points while forcing the Lions to take a time out with 5:52 remaining in regulation.

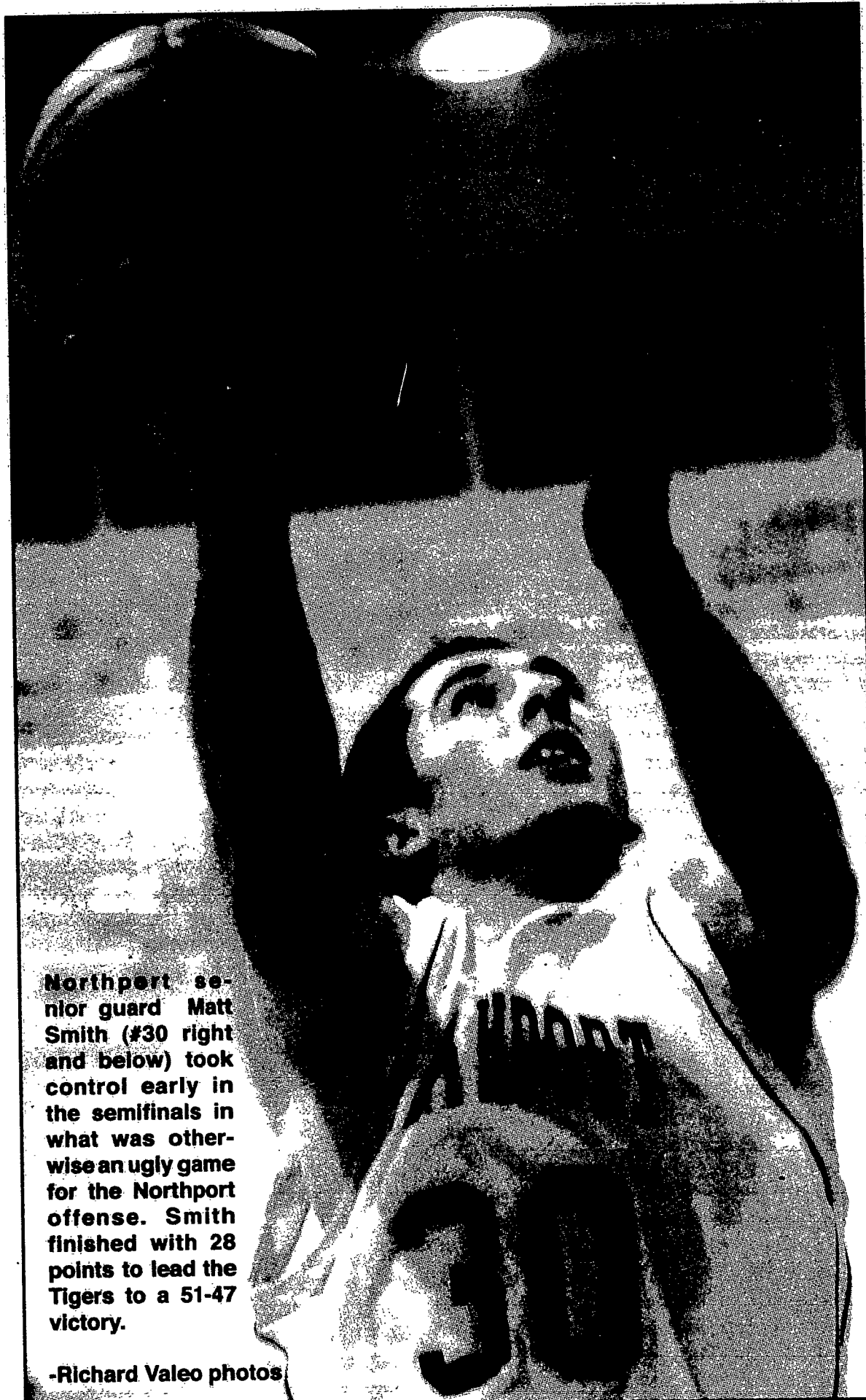
A layup from Smith tied the game at 41-41, but Longwood answered back to retake the lead with a basket. Northport forward Andrew Seaman, who from off the bench played tough defense while helping the Tigers maintain a presence inside, hit a hook-shot to tie the game.

With 2:40 left in regulation, the Lions scored again, but two free throws from Smith tied the game on the Tigers' next possession. After a stop on defense, Milligan went for a layup and missed, but rebounded his own shot to keep the possession going. The rebound led to Smith driving to the hole and hitting a layup to give the Tigers a 47-45 lead with 1:03 left in regulation, its first since the first quarter.

The Tiger defense made a stop and Milligan drew a foul and went to the line with 26 seconds. With the game in his hands, Milligan stepped to the line while the Longwood fans cheered as loud as they could in an attempt to rattle him. Despite the clangor, Milligan hit the first shot, then the second, to put his team up by four points with 26 seconds left.

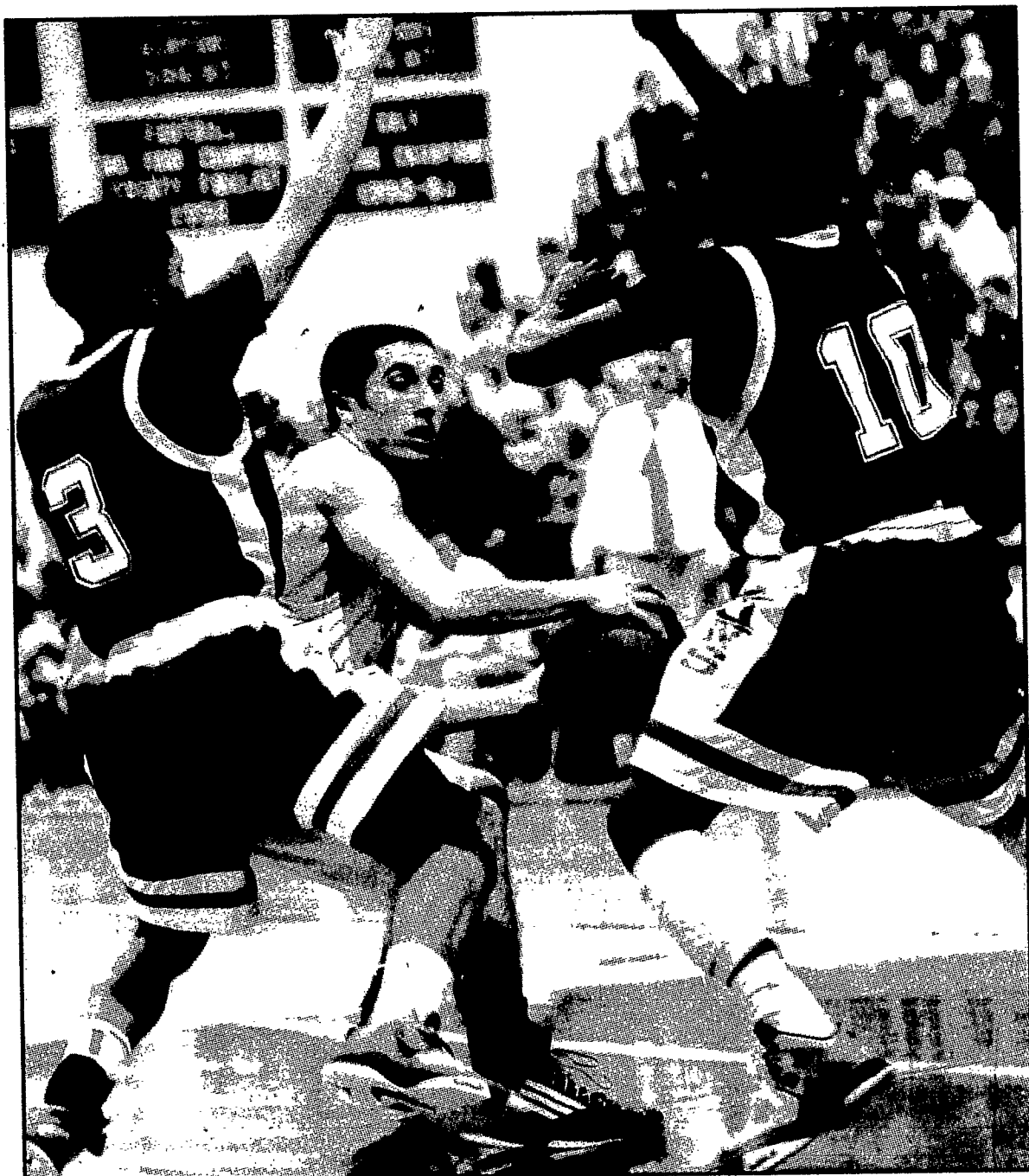
Just as it seemed the victory was in hand, the Lions scored to cut the lead back down to two points with nine seconds remaining in regulation. During a Longwood time out, D'Eloia and the Tigers remained confident.

"We've been here before," D'Eloia said
(Continued on next page)



Northport senior guard Matt Smith (#30 right and below) took control early in the semifinals in what was otherwise an ugly game for the Northport offense. Smith finished with 28 points to lead the Tigers to a 51-47 victory.

-Richard Valeo photos



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