

## Mulkern Shoots Hornets Past OA in Defensive Struggle



Mansfield senior Sydney Mulkern came off the bench and lifted the Hornets with a game-high 17 points, including 13 in the second half, to hold off Oliver Ames. (Josh Perry/HockomockSports.com)

MANSFIELD, Mass. – Coming into Friday night’s game against Oliver Ames in the Albertini Gym, Mansfield coach Mike Redding wasn’t sure what he would be able to get from senior guard Sydney Mulkern, who had been sick at practice the day before.

As it turns out, the Hornets got plenty from Mulkern. She came off the bench and scored a game-high 17 points, including 13 in the second half and eight in the fourth quarter, to provide the offensive punch in an otherwise defensive struggle with the Tigers, helping the Hornets pull out a 41-32 win.

“Syd was sick all week but she gave us some minutes and just made some big shots,” Mansfield coach Mike Redding said. “We really didn’t think she was going to play tonight. Yesterday she really looked awful and said she’d be able to help a little off the bench and she was probably the difference tonight.”

Neither team was really able to find a rhythm on the offensive side of the court. The game was tied at 2-2 five minutes into the opening quarter. Maggie Danehy (13 rebounds) scored her only bucket on an offensive rebound to put the Hornets in front, but freshman Caroline Peper (nine points) answered with a three. Ashley Santos scored back-to-back baskets, but Ally Scolnick knocked down a three to tie it 8-8. Caroline Flynn also grabbed 10 rebounds in the first alone and finished with 20 boards for the Tigers.

Mulkern’s first points gave Mansfield a 10-8 lead after one, a lead that it would never relinquish.

The second quarter was even more difficult for both offenses. Mady Bendanillo (eight points and seven rebounds) scored to make it 12-8 but neither team would score again until there was 2:10 left in the quarter when freshman Hailey Bourne got her lone basket of the night for OA. Mulkern hit a layup and Megan MacVicar scored off a Bendanillo assist to make it 18-12 at the break.

“It was 18-12 at the half, come on girls can we score some points?” OA coach Laney Clement-Holbrook was left asking at halftime. “We scored 57 against Foxboro and we only managed 12 in a half tonight. I’d be as happy with 41 as points against game, but, I don’t know, offensively we just weren’t present.”

Mansfield came out in the second half and started to pull away, leading by as many as 12 points at one point. Mulkern started the third with a deep three off a pass from Kara Bendanillo (six steals and three assists). Peper cut the lead to 23-16, but Mady Bendanillo hit a huge three-pointer at the shot clock buzzer to put the Hornets up double digits and her sister followed with a layup in transition for a 28-16 lead.

“There were a lot of good athletes defending and the refs let us play a little bit and it was just tough to get a good look,” Redding said. “Both teams are pretty well-coached on what the other team wants to do and we had some kids step up.”

OA continued to find points tough to come by, but the Tigers made a little run to cut the Hornets lead to just five. Sadie Homer got a steal and transition layup and twice Meg Holleran was able to find Scolnick (team-high 13 points) on consecutive backdoor cuts.

“We got into no rhythm but I think it was self-inflicted,” said Clement-Holbrook. “Not to discredit Mansfield’s defense because they always play good defense, but we were so out of sync. We had shots but we just didn’t finish them. We are much more capable of presenting ourselves in a better way but we just didn’t play up to our capabilities.”

Kara Bendanillo got out in transition to close the third with a layup and give the Hornets a seven-point edge heading to the fourth. Scolnick opened the fourth with a jumper to keep it close but then Mulkern broke the game wide open.

She sandwiched a Becca Hottleman steal and layup with a pair of threes (one after Kara Bendanillo kept a possession alive with an offensive rebound) to extend the lead back to 11. OA kept the game on edge to the final whistle by causing havoc with a press, raising the energy of the team but not getting the Tigers any closer than eight points.

“We’d rather win ugly than lose. Defensively we played well but on offense we were just out of sorts,” Redding said. “We made enough shots but we never got into any rhythm and fortunately they didn’t either.”

Redding admitted that this was an important win for the Hornets, despite it still being early in the season. The Hornets, who are seeking a program-record fourth straight league title, trail division-leading Franklin by two games and are now tied with the Tigers for second in the Kelley-Rex.

“This was almost like an elimination game for us,” he said. “Now we’re still two back and Franklin still has OA twice, they have Foxboro, and we have Franklin at home. There’s a long way to go but you feel like we’re in it and now we need to go on a little run in January to be there in February and have a shot at a [title].”

Mansfield (5-3, 4-2) will face a tough test on Tuesday night with the visit of Canton, which has won five games in a row, while Oliver Ames (5-3, 4-2) will try to get back on track at home against Sharon before facing Franklin for the first time.