

# Falcons Soar Into SWC Semi-finals

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They say good things come to those who wait.

Following a 2019 season in which the Joel Barlow High School basketball team missed out on the SWC tournament, on Friday night the Falcons used senior leadership to pull away late in a 51-44 victory over sixth-seeded Pomperaug High School in the first round of the SWC playoffs.

After last season's early season exit, the team used a 15-5 regular season to grab the third seed in the tournament, allowing them to host a playoff game.

The early stages of the contest were a back-and-forth affair. The Panthers jumped out to a 4-2 lead midway through the opening quarter, but baskets by Clark Gilmore, Carter Janki, and Austin DeLuca gave Joel Barlow the 10-4 lead, which would grow to 12-8 after one.

In the second quarter, Pomperaug senior Dion Zhuta would take over. Behind his 15 first-half points, 10 of which coming in the second quarter, the Panthers would outscore the Falcons 23-11 to shock the home crowd and take an eight-point lead into the halftime break.

"They ran a couple of good screens for [Zhuta]. We were just a second too late. He's a

great player. When he gets room, he's going to knock down shots," said Joel Barlow head coach Pat Yerina.

Joel Barlow suddenly stood just 16 minutes away from a premature exit in the postseason league tournament.

But DeLuca would have something to say about it.

Between lockdown defense and three three-pointers, DeLuca would put the Falcons back in front, 35-34, with eight minutes separating them and an SWC tournament semi-finals appearance.



Austin DeLuca scored a game-high 17 points in the victory over Pomperaug (Photo: Dan Gardella)

Joel Barlow extended the lead to five and did not allow Pomperaug to score for the first four minutes of the final quarter. After Pomperaug's Max Fradkin connected on a three

to bring the lead back to two, Gilmore matched it with a three of his own to keep the Falcons' lead at five with 2:30 remaining.

The Panthers would add a few more three-pointers, but the Joel Barlow lead would stand and send the Falcons into the semi-finals, where they will face second seed Kolbe Cathedral, who knocked off Bethel, 58-38.

"We get a chance to redeem one of our losses," said Yerina. "By getting to the semi-finals, you get another game in. That's what you shoot for."

DeLuca led the way for the Falcons with 17 points behind the strength of five three-pointers. No shot was bigger than the three he made during the Joel Barlow run early in the third quarter.

"I have to give credit to my teammates," said DeLuca. "Pomperaug was in a zone, and every time they get into the middle, they looked for me and I was able to knock them down. I was feeling it, but they gave me the confidence that I needed."

Behind DeLuca, Gilmore and Janki added nine points apiece to pace the Falcons with Barlow big man Thomas Richetelli contributing another six . Pomperaug was led by Zhuta, who was held scoreless in the second half, thanks to strong defensive performances from senior Arnold Wright and sophomore Sebastian Hurlbut.

Joel Barlow will face off against Kolbe Cathedral for a spot in the SWC tournament championship game on Tuesday, March 3. The Falcons lost to the Cougars 54-40 in their only meeting in the regular season. However, Joel Barlow feels confident that they have more wins left in them.

"This means a lot to us," said DeLuca. "We've worked really hard this season and we've done things that Barlow has not done in the past. We really want to keep it going. We think we can make a good run this season. We're just going to keep rolling on."





