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CLARION – When Ed McIntrye took over as the head coach at Cranberry three years ago, he gave then-freshman point guard Blake Marchinke his 2011 KSAC championship medal, which he won as the head coach at Venango Catholic.

The veteran coach told Marchinke he could keep it until Marchinke won his own KSAC medal.

As McIntrye slipped the 2026 KSAC championship medal around Marchinke's neck on Saturday night following the Berries' 53-38 win over Clarion in the KSAC title game, Marchinke pulled out that 2011 medal McIntrye had given him two years ago and gave it back to his head coach.

"It was a pretty special moment right there when I gave Coach Ed his medal back from when he was at Venango Catholic," Marchinke, now a junior star, said. "It's been a long time coming for this program. I mean, we were kind of rock bottom, and we built it up, this core group of guys. It's just awesome to come out here on the big floor at Clario tonight and get it done. It's pretty special."

Cranberry was 7-15 the year before Marchinke advanced to the varsity level and hadn't had a winning record since 2016.

Last year, the Berries won the District 9 Class 3A title, and this season, they have now added the school's first-ever KSAC tournament title to their list of accomplishments.

"Cranberry has such a following," McIntrye said. "A lot of people who put so much time and energy and love into it as a community. It is such a big deal for everybody. I'm just proud of all the players and the coach, the fans, and the families. I am really happy for all of them."

It was a dominant second-half performance that gave Cranberry the title in its first-ever appearance in the KSAC tournament, which was being played for the 19th time since its inception in 2007 (there was no game in 2021 because of COVID-19).

After surviving another hot start by Clarion, which led Moniteau 42-5 at halftime of the semifinal game on Friday, the Berries found themselves tied with the Bobcats at 25 at halftime.

The game was still tied at 27 a minute-and-a-half into the second half before Cranberry went on a 10-4 run to close out the third quarter with a 37-31 lead.

Landon Baker and Marchinke accounted for all 10 of those points, with each scoring five. That included each player converting an old-school 3-point play.

“We’ve been talking for a long time, you have to be the more aggressive team in these games,” McIntrye said. “You have to come out, and you have to want it. I thought we were pretty stagnant in the first half tonight. At halftime, we talked about being more aggressive again. I think we were much more aggressive.”

That aggressiveness continued in the fourth quarter when Cranberry all but put the game away with a quarter-opening 9-0 run, which pushed the lead to 44-31 with just over six minutes left.

“The first half was a little rough,” Cranberry sophomore forward Shia Sanchez, who was a beat on the boards for the Berries with nine rebounds, six in the second half, while adding 10 points, four in the fourth quarter, said. “I had to do what I needed to do, what the team needed the most. That’s what I came to do, grab every board in the second half, hyping the team up, and getting the boards. That’s what we do.”

Clarion had one mini-run left in it, getting four straight points from Trey Hooks, to close the gap to 44-35 with just under five minutes left.

But Sanchez stopped that run with a strong spinning, driving layup that started a 4-0 spit for Cranberry that put the lead back to 11.

“Shia was more aggressive in the second half,” McIntrye said “It was just a better overall half.”

Parker Miller and Clarion couldn’t miss in the game’s opening four minutes.

Miller hit three 3-pointers in a 2 ½ minute span, and Clarion led 11-4 right out of the gate and 15-6 following a Miller 2-point bucket with 2:18 to play.

But after scoring 15 points in under six minutes, the Bobcats went cold and managed just 23 points the rest of the game, including just 13 in the second half when they shot just 4 of 21 (19%).

“I thought our effort on defense and rebounding was just terrific to find the game,” McIntrye said.

While Cranberry was obviously pleased with the outcome, Clarion head coach Sam Heeter said his team was getting tired of watching other teams celebrate in championship games at Tippin Gym.

Last year, the Bobcats lost to Redbank Valley in the KSAC title game at Tippin and then again to the Bulldogs in the District 9 Class 2A championship game.

“We are so sick and tired of doing this,” Heeter said. “We’re so sick and tired of standing there and getting silver medals and watching everybody else get gold. That’s fuel right there (for the upcoming D9 Class 2A playoffs). I think it’s going to help us out here in the long run.”

Heeter said getting behind early in the second half and having to play catch-up didn’t play into what Clarion, which had split the regular-season series with Cranberry, wanted to accomplish.

“It’s not just playing from behind,” Heeter said. “It’s giving up that run (at the start of the fourth quarter). It all comes down to doing fundamental things, not boxing guys out and giving up an extra possession here and there. In the grand scheme of things, one or two extra possessions because we miss a box out is ultimately what could decide a game.”

While Clarion was forced to watch another team take the gold, Cranberry wasn’t about to apologize for it.

“It’s great, it’s great,” Sancehz said. “First time in Cranberry history we got KSACs. The feeling is great. Now I am going to go celebrate with the team in the locker room.”

Marchinke led Cranberry with 15 points, while Cole Findlay joined Sanchez with 10 points. Conner Zerbe added nine tallies, and Baker had seven.

Miller had 14 points for Clarion, 11 in the first quarter. Hooks added eight.

Both teams are top seeds in the upcoming D9 playoffs.

Cranberry, in a two-team bracket, will face Brookville in the Class 3A title game on Feb. 25 at a neutral site to be announced.

Clarion is the top seed in the 2A bracket and will host eighth-seeded Brockway at 7 p.m. on Wednesday.