Both the Eastern and West Washington boys' basketball teams had opportunities to win Friday's county showdown in Pekin.

In the end it was the Musketeers who made the most of those opportunities in a 56-52 win.

Even though the Musketeers had only lost two games entering the contest, Head Coach Scott Newcomb said winning was a must for his team.

"That was a must win for us," he said. "Just knowing we have the capabilities to get the job done will help with our confidence. Now we go on the road next week at Crawford County and then we come home to play Clarksville. Those are two beatable teams, but you have to have confidence going into those games. I think tonight's win gave us that because if we are 0-3 going into those games it kind of becomes a monkey on our backs."

The Musketeers led by just two, 43-41, midway through the fourth period and seemed to be in trouble as Austin Churchman picked up his fourth foul.

On the ensuing possession, Shane Williams knocked down a three for Eastern and while they were never able to pull away, the shot seemed to settle things down.

Williams' shot also seemed to ignite the Musketeers' RJ Jackson.

Jackson scored nine of his game-high 22 points over the final 3:40, none of which were bigger than an and-one he converted after a Senator turnover stretching the margin to seven, 51-44, with 2:54 remaining.

Even with Jackson's spurt, West Washington continued to hang around and might have been even closer if not for missing six of 11 free throws in the final eight minutes.

Eastern wasn't a lot better at the line, but did make just enough, including Alex Doebler converting one of two with 13 seconds left, for the game's final margin.

Senator Head Coach Greg Dean said the missed free throws really hurt his team.

"We did a good of being aggressive, getting to the rim and getting to the foul line," he said. "The problem is we shot 30 free throws and missed 13. If we convert five of those misses, we win the game. We have to do a better job of that.

"We also need to clean up a few things defensively. The good news is those are things we can learn, fix and get better at."

The game was tight throughout, but Eastern had control starting in the second quarter when a basket by Dakota Snider and an old-fashioned three-point play by Churchman put them up 25-17.

Baskets by Jackson and Jack Hayes kept the margin at seven. Then a bucket just before half by Hayes made the lead six, 31-25, at the break.

Jude Olesh drained a three in the opening minutes of third quarter giving EHS its biggest lead at nine, 34-25.

That's as big as the advantage would get.

The Senators mounted a furious comeback.

Chad Thompson, who led WW with 20 points, scored four in a hurry and then Ty Bolton drained a three, trimming the Musketeer lead to five, 37-32.

Another free throw by Thompson and a basket by Bolton made things even closer, 37-35.

Eastern stopped the bleeding when Churchman hit one of two free throws and Grant Newcomb drained a three with 1:49 remaining in the third quarter that put them back in front by six, 41-35.

Dean said the Senators have to do a better job of making plays at crucial points in the game.

"We've got to recognize when there is blood in the water," Dean said. "When you have

opportunities to swing momentum you have to take advantage. We had those tonight, but let them get away from us. We have to string things together. Basketball is a game of spurts and Eastern had a few more spurts than we did. We will work on that. We need to convert good defensive stands into points offensively and when we get some good offense, we need to get better at going back and getting stops."

Newcomb felt the same way about his team.

"It seems like with it being so early in the season when teams make a run at us we kind of doubt ourselves instead of toughening up and getting the job done," he said. "We still have some doubt. We have to keep getting better at that and believing in each other and moving forward."

Even though the stats won't show it, Newcomb said he was really pleased with the game played by Snider, who managed just four points and three rebounds, but was partly responsible for holding Thompson to just two points in the final quarter.

"Dakota Snider played a heck of a game," Newcomb said. "We put him on Thompson and he did a great job there, but he also played a great floor game. He had some rebounds, defended well and did an excellent job for us."

West Washington won't have long to work on the things they need to as they took the court Tuesday (Dec. 4) for their first home game of the season against Christian Academy.

The Senators then open Patoka Lake Athletic Conference play at home Friday against Paoli.

Eastern has a little more time before they take the court again. They travel to Crawford County to play the Wolfpack Friday.and then return home Saturday to play Clarksville.