

Burger nets 30 as Saints top Wash

Written by Jim Ecker

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Xavier boys basketball coach Ryan Luehrsmann rolled the dice with Mitchell Burger on Friday night and hit the jackpot.

Burger shook off early foul problems and poured in 30 points as the Saints pulled away from Washington, 74-55, in a Mississippi Valley Conference game at Xavier.

The Saints, who are ranked No. 2 in Class 3A, raised their overall record to 13-2 and climbed to 9-1 in the MVC.

Burger picked up his second foul with 2:08 left in the first period and sat for awhile, but Luehrsmann put him back in the game with 16 seconds left in the quarter and the Saints trailing 13-9.

Burger never left the floor again and played a terrific game with five 3-pointers and great leadership, especially after backcourt buddy Matt Mims left the game in the third quarter with a sprained ankle.

Some coaches would leave their star player on the bench for the rest of the first half with two fouls, but Luehrsmann was confident Burger could handle the assignment.

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Plus, the Saints needed him.

"He's the catalyst," Luehrsmann said. "He's the one that stirs the drink for us and makes things happen."

Burger popped in 12 points in the second quarter despite playing more carefully with two fouls to help Xavier take a 27-22 lead at intermission, but he saved his best streak in the fourth quarter with the Saints clinging to a 44-41 advantage.

Burger hit three straight 3-pointers in a matter of seconds to make it 47-41, 50-41 and 53-41, then he finished the game with four straight assists in the final 67 seconds to wrap it up, including pretty feeds to Ryan Stulken and Max Techau for dunks.

Burger finished with 13 points in the fourth period and ended the game with six assists.



"I'm really happy with how he performed down the stretch," Luehrsmann said. "He took it upon himself to make some huge shots and he was the difference-maker."

Burger hit 10 of 20 shots overall and was 5 for 9 on 3-pointers. He did not mind playing in the

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first half with two fouls and said the key was being smart on defense. "Just keeping your hands off people and playing help defense," he explained.

Burger always plays with great enthusiasm and a hard-nosed approach to the game. It was more of the same against Washington.

"I just play with as much energy as possible," he said. "After I hit my first shot, maybe I'll feed off it a little bit."

Burger has a routine he likes to follow on game-day. "Usually I get out a couple of hours early and shoot and then take a nap," he said.

Once the snooze is over, he's ready to torment opponents with his fearless drives to the basket and 3-point shooting.

Luehrsmann knew Burger could play well with foul problems.

"I think the key thing with Mitch, he's a pretty intelligent guy," Luehrsmann said. "He knows on the defensive end he can't gamble quite as much, but it doesn't change his aggression. He continues to be aggressive on the offensive end, attacking."

Burger did not collect his third foul until there was 6:35 left in the game, right before his third straight 3-pointer made it 53-41.

"He loves to compete, he loves to be in big moments, he loves the big stage," Luehrsmann said. "It's fun to watch him thrive in that environment. He's just a kid who's at his best when he's in those situations."

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Washington has a pair of quality guards with Keion Wills and Hunter Strait, adding to Burger's determination to succeed.

"He was really motivated tonight to have a special game," Luehrsmann said. "And when Matt (Mims) went out, I think he took it upon himself even more. And to his credit he took over the game."

Jackson Joens popped in 13 points for Xavier. Techau finished with 12 points and Mims scored 10, including the first seven points of the game for the Saints.

The Saints poured in 30 points in the fourth quarter.

"We knew if we could just hang with them we'd pull away in the end, because we have such good chemistry," Burger said. "If somebody hits one shot, we just feed off it."

Wills scored 18 points for Washington, which fell to 5-10 overall and 2-8 in the conference. Strait finished with 12 points.

Luehrsmann continues to be happy with how his club plays unselfish basketball and plays hard.

"If we continue to have that mind-set, if we continue to be hungry to improve, I think we have a chance to be pretty formidable by the end of the year," he remarked.

WASHINGTON (55): Wills 5 7-8 18, Strait 6 0-0 12, Dawson 2 1-1 5, Beard 0 0-0 0, Bennett 0 0-0 0, Hobbs 3 0-0 6, Thomas 3 0-0 7, Williams 3 1-5 7,

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Potter 0 0-0 0, Westmoreland 0 0-0 0. Totals 22 9-14 55.

XAVIER (74): Burger 10 5-7 30, Mims 4 1-1 10, Butkowski 1 0-0 3, Whitten 0 0-0 0, Joens 4 3-4 13, Stulken 3 0-0 6, Schulte 0 0-0 0, Techau 6 0-0 12.
Totals 28 9-12 74.

Halftime - Xavier 27, Washington 22. 3-point goals - Washington 2 (Wills 1, Thomas 1), Xavier 9 (Burger 5, Joens 2, Mims 1, Butkowski 1).