

Butkowski helps Saints dump Clippers

Written by Jim Ecker

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Nolan Butkowski found out Wednesday at a team meeting that he'd be starting in place of Mitchell Burger in Xavier's big game against Clear Creek Amana in the Class 3A district finals Thursday night.

It did not faze him a bit.

Butkowski embraced the assignment and scored a team-high 16 points as the Saints pulled away from the Clippers, 56-43, in the Prairie gym to move within one victory of reaching the state tournament for the second straight year.

Xavier (15-8) will face Mount Pleasant (18-5) in the substate finals at 7 p.m. Monday at Iowa City West.

Burger leads the Saints in scoring at 16.6 points, but the senior guard had to serve a one-game suspension for an unspecified violation of rules.

In stepped Butkowski, who began the night with a 5.0 average.

Butkowski started a few other games during the season when Burger and Matt Mims were unable to play, so getting his name called at the start of a contest was not a foreign assignment.

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"It didn't rattle me or anything like that," he said. "I had been in this position before when Mitchell was hurt. No added pressure."

Butkowski popped in three 3-pointers and hit some key shots for the Saints. He nailed a big 3-pointer after Clear Creek Amana had pulled within 26-24 in the third quarter and he made another triple a few minutes to make it 34-27 entering the fourth period.

"It doesn't surprise me," Coach Ryan Luehrsmann said about Butkowski's performance. "He's a very competitive, tough-minded, team-first kind of player."

"He knew he was in a difficult spot, but he's the kind of kid that I think looks forward to those type of challenges. He likes to be in that situation."

The Saints had a 36-30 lead with five minutes left in the ballgame against their pesky Wamac Conference opponent when they finally took control with a 12-2 spurt in a little more than two minutes. Mims scored eight points during the decisive 12-2 run with a pair of 3-pointers, a steal and a layup to help his club take a 48-32 advantage with 2:20 left.

Mims played a calm, steady game at point guard and never felt like he had to make up for Burger's absence by scoring a lot of points himself.

"Coach just told me to be myself out there and play within myself and I didn't need to do anything special," said Mims, who finished with 15 markers. "It worked well."

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