

Saints drop rematch to No.1 Dowling, 24-2

Written by Bill Seals

Friday, 29 August 2014 22:53 - Last Updated Friday, 29 August 2014 22:55

WEST DES MOINES - The season-opener between Xavier and Dowling Catholic played out much differently than last year's state championship game in the UNI-Dome, but the end result was very much the same as the Maroons put a stranglehold on a new-look Saints offense throughout a 24-2 victory.

Although the Saints owned more than a five-minute edge in time of possession and first-year starting quarterback Bryce Schulte got plenty of reps against one of the best defenses in the state, the sophomore threw a pair of costly interceptions to Dowling's Dante Campero and Xavier never really threatened against the Maroon defense.

It was a marathon day for a Saints team that traveled two hours to central Iowa, only to deal with an hour-long rain delay late in the second quarter.

"They're a well-coached team with great players, but I think our kids battled hard," said Xavier Coach Duane Schulte. "They had to go to school all day, get on a bus and come down here with the weather the way it was. They tried to stay focused and play the number-one ranked team in the biggest classification."

Dowling is ranked No.1 in Class 4A and Xavier is ranked No.1 in Class 3A by the Des Moines Register.

Schulte completed 6-of-22 passes for 36 yards and added 11 yards on the ground for the Saints, who were held to only 122 yards of total offense. Many Xavier drives were aided by penalties, as the Maroons committed a total of 11 for 120 yards.

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"He's been around the game his whole life and has watched his older brother Reggie do it when he was here," Duane Schulte said of his son Bryce. "His demeanor is unbelievable for a sophomore starting in a varsity game against the number-one team in the state.

"He's had a lot of help from Sam Tursi and Blake Witten, just getting through reps in practice. Their effort helped him tonight, both before and during the game."

On the flip side, after giving up 44 points in a state title game loss in Cedar Falls, an inexperienced group of Xavier defenders did an admirable job in the rematch.

Dowling managed just 231 yards of total offense on 52 plays. Senior Ryan Boyle finished with a flurry, but the dual-threat quarterback was held to negative-eight yards rushing to go with 150 yards passing.

"The scout-team offense was giving us a great look all week, so we felt like we were really prepared," said linebacker Nik Ekland, the lone returning starter on defense. "Ryan Boyle is a stud, so you've got to give him a lot of credit.

"In a sense, shutting him down was all right. But we've got a lot of work to do, since 24-2 is not a good final score."

Xavier's head coach said his group played assignment-sound football through much of the game.

"They learned a lesson the last time we played these guys and tried to take care of their responsibility and do their job," Schulte said. "A couple big plays here or there, and a couple situations that didn't go our way, maybe if it did it could have been a different game.

"Dowling is so big and physical, so for our guys to battle the way they did was a huge complement to our kids."

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Both offenses struggled through much of the early going and traded punts. Dowling mounted the first scoring threat late in the opening quarter, but the Saint defense rose up for a fourth-and-goal stop on the opening play of the second quarter as the middle of the front stuffed Isaiah Patton for a loss.

The Maroons had mounted an impressive 71-yard drive that spanned 13 plays and nearly half of the entire opening quarter.

Xavier tried to answer with a drive of its own. Schulte connected with Ekland on an 11-yard shovel pass to convert on 3rd-and-8. However, the first-year starter was intercepted by Campero deep in his own territory and Dowling took over at the 17-yard line.

The Maroons committed an untimely holding penalty on a 2nd-and-8, which ultimately cost them an opportunity for the game's first touchdown. Boyle's 16-yard pass to Eric Fardal on 3rd-and-long put Dowling Catholic in position for a short 22-yard field goal from Nick McLellan. The Maroons opened up a 3-0 lead with 7:23 left in the half.

The Saints took over with poor field position following the kickoff and picked the wrong time to go three-and-out. Dowling took advantage of another short field and needed just three plays to go 35 yards and take a 10-0 lead. Running back Cole Deskin rushed 14 yards for the touchdown with 5:35 remaining in the half.

Dowling's touchdown came shortly before a lightning strike south of the stadium halted play for nearly an hour. Both teams agreed to eliminate halftime, in order to beat another line of storms moving in from the west.

Following the weather delay, Xavier continued its string of three-and-outs and again gave Dowling good field position later in the first half. Boyle connected with Joe Gorsche for nine yards on first down before going deep to Charlie Schulte on a 42-yard touchdown. The Maroons opened up a 17-0 lead with 1:09 left in the half.

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Thanks to a safety on the second play of the second half, Xavier finally got the boost it needed. Boyle tried scrambling to his left on 2nd-and-14 from the 1-yard line and met a host of Saints tacklers.

Pulling out all the stops trailing on the road, Xavier pulled off a fake punt on a 4th-and-2 when Matt Downey rushed to the right side for 16 yards. But the drive stalled and the Saints had to punt following Jo Jo Jok's sack of Schulte on 3rd-and-12.

The Saints mounted their longest drive of the game midway through the third quarter, going 14 plays and marching into field-goal territory. However, Dowling Catholic partially deflected the three-point attempt and the score remained 17-2.

Trying to rally the offense midway through the fourth quarter, Schulte threw his second interception of the game to Campero and the Maroons took over with just six minutes remaining. Four plays later, Isaiah Patton plunged into the end zone from three yards out to put the finishing touches on a 24-2 season-opening victory.

"We have a lot of improvements to make, but everybody was giving it their all," Ekland said. "The credit has to go to Dowling, because they're a great, hard-working team.

"A matchup like this was a really good one for us. These guys will probably be one of the best teams we face this year."

Xavier will look to regroup this week before hitting the road again for a game at Assumption.

DOWLING 24, XAVIER 2

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CRX DC

First downs 9 14

Rushes-yards 34-74 35-81

Passing yards 48 150

Comp-Att-Int 8-26-2 12-17-0

Fumbles-lost 0-0 2-0

Punts-avg. 8-30.8 5-45.8

Penalties-yards 6-55 11-120

Xavier 0 0 2 0 - 2

Dowling 0 17 0 7 - 24

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Scoring plays

DC - FG McLellan 29

DC - Deskin 15 run (McLellan kick)

DC - Schulte 42 pass from Boyle (McLellan kick)

X - Safety, Boyle tackled in end zone

DC - Patton 3 run (McLellan kick)