

Saints ride big 2nd half to state

Written by Jim Ecker

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Ryan Luehrsmann played in two NCAA basketball tournaments during his career with the Iowa Hawkeyes, but he never reached the Iowa high school tournament during his stellar prep career at Cedar Rapids Washington.

Now he's going to Des Moines with the Xavier Saints.

The Saints poured in 56 points in the second half Monday night and whipped Mount Vernon, 80-64, in the Class 3A substate finals at the U.S. Cellular Center.

Xavier is seeded No. 6 at state and will meet No. 3 seed Pella on Tuesday, March 10 at 8:15 p.m. at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

The Saints (16-8) have been on a surge the past month with eight straight wins, but they struggled in the first half against Mount Vernon and trailed 30-24 after the first 16 minutes of action. Xavier fans had sweaty palms at halftime, but the Saints regrouped and came out with fire in their eyes in the third period.

"In the locker room we just calmed down and said, 'This game is ours,'" senior Calvin Winker remarked. "We needed to focus more on defense and pounding it inside, because we knew we

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had an advantage with that. And that's what we did.

"We knew in our hearts we were not losing this game against anyone," he said. "We knew this was our year to make it."

Xavier reached the state tournament in 2004, 2005 and 2006 under Hall of Fame coach Dick Breitbach, but the Saints lost in the first round each time. This will be their first trip to Des Moines in nine years and the fourth in school history.

Winker, a guard and wing player most of his career, moved into the low post on offense Monday night and tortured Mount Vernon with his interior moves. He finished with 22 points, including 16 in the second half when the Saints finally caught the Mustangs (15-9) and took control.

"Hey, whatever my teammates and coaches tell me to do, I'll do it and I'll do my best at it," said Winker of his low-post assignment.

Senior Adam McDermott also scored 22 points for Xavier in a variety of ways with a pair of 3-pointers and a 10-for-10 showing at the foul line.

Michael Mims poured in 13 of his 15 points in the second half, Mitchell Burger added 11 points and Connor Ramlo had eight points.

It's odd for a team to score 24 points in the first half and 56 in the second half, but 16 minutes of excellent basketball were enough to get the Saints to Wells Fargo Arena in Luehrsmann's third year as head coach.

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It seemed like it took Xavier the first 16 minutes to realize they had a real game on their hands against their third straight opponent from the Wamac Conference. The Saints pummeled Benton Community by 30 points in the first round and dumped Solon by 31 points in the second round, but their third Wamac foe was an entirely different story.

"They got into us, took us out of what we wanted to do offensively," said Luehrsmann. "Their guys were capitalizing and hitting shots. I think it was just more them playing well, rather than us not being sharp.

"It was pretty spirited at halftime and the guys certainly responded," he said.

The Saints did not look like the same club that whipped Linn-Mar and Dubuque Wahlert the past few weeks. Not in the first half, anyway. "I think we came out a little nervous, a little tight," said McDermott.

Luehrsmann talked to his club at halftime about getting a string of defensive stops to help fuel the offense. And it helped when Mims canned a 3-pointer to begin the third quarter to relieve some of the pressure.

The game was tied 40-40 with about three minutes left in the third quarter when the Saints finally took control. Mims hit a jumper, Burger canned a 3-pointer and Mims hit a 3-pointer for a 48-40 lead. McDermott made a layup, got fouled and finished the three-point play to give the Saints a 51-40 advantage after three quarters with an 11-0 run.

Winker scored on a post move to begin the fourth quarter and Mims made a layup with a sweet pass from Burger, giving Xavier a 55-40 lead and finishing an overall 15-0 spurt. Mount Vernon never got closer than 11 points again.

Xavier outscored the Mustangs 27-10 in the third quarter and outscored them 56-34 in the second half. Now it's on to the state tournament in Des Moines.

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"I feel great," said Winker. "Our whole team has worked so hard. We're ready for The Well."

The Saints lost in the substate finals last year. Now they've taken the next step. "I feel like it will be a great environment and I can't wait," said McDermott.

The Saints were not sure of their first-round opponent in the moments after the game. "We're there in the dance and that's all that matters," said Luehrsmann. "I like our chances, whoever we play."

Tommy Hook led Mount Vernon with 17 points. Andy DeCamp scored 16, Austin Ash netted 15 and Connor Herrmann had 10.

Xavier helped its cause Monday night by sinking 25 of 29 free throws.

XAVIER (80): Mims 6 1-3 15, McDermott 5 10-10 22, Burger 4 2-2 11, Ramlo 1 6-8 8, Klostermann 0 0-0 0, Welch 0 0-0 0, Downey 0 0-0 0, Brems 0 0-0 0, Winker 8 6-6 22, Stulken 0 0-0 0, Otting 1 0-0 2. Totals 25 25-29 80.

MOUNT VERNON (64): Bevans 0 0-0 0, DeCamp 6 0-0 16, Rud 1 0-0 2, Hook 7 2-2 17, Teubel 2 0-0 4, Kranig 0 0-0 0, Hauser 0 0-0 0, Herrmann 3 4-4 10, Ketelsen 0 0-0 0, Ash 6 0-0 15. Totals 25 6-6 64.

Halftime - Mount Vernon 30, Xavier 24. 3-point goals - Xavier 5 (Mims 2, McDermott 2, Burger 1), Mount Vernon 8 (DeCamp 4, Ash 3, Hook 1).