

Saints win on Steffen's 4-hitter

Written by Jim Ecker
Friday, 08 July 2016 04:52 -



VINTON - The girls on the Xavier softball team like to pile into their white school vans for road trips so they can sing, listen to loud music and relax before ballgames.

The formula worked Thursday night when the Saints blanked Vinton-Shellsburg, 3-0, in the quarterfinals of the Class 4A regional tournament in Vinton on a four-hitter by Maria Steffen.

Now comes an even longer trip for the Saints, who will make the two-hour trek to Pella Saturday night to face the Dutch in the regional semifinals. They don't seem fazed a bit.

"It will just be longer for them to be excited and listen to loud music," said Coach Nikki Gahrning. "That's what they do.

"They enjoy the van rides. It's kind of their thing. They love being in the van and travelling."

Xavier lost in the regional semifinals in 2013, 2014 and 2015 - all three times on their home field - so Gahrning welcomed the opportunity to open the 2016 playoffs on the road.

"I think they were very relaxed being on the road," she said.

Steffen certainly looked relaxed in the circle. She struck out nine batters and walked only one as the Saints (17-24) kept their season alive.

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"You can feel more pressure at home," said Steffen. "There are more people watching and you feel like you have to win all the time."

The Saints belted Vinton-Shellsburg, 11-0, in a regular-season tournament on June 24, but they had to work a little harder against the Vikings this time. It was a scoreless affair until the top of the fourth inning, when the Saints pushed two runs across the plate to give themselves a little breathing room.

"The fourth inning came and we decided we had to put the hammer down," said Steffen.



Cassie Himmelsbach led off with a single and moved to second base on a sacrifice bunt by Jamie Feltes. Stephanie Wehr walked and was replaced at first base by Jenae Marshall, a courtesy runner for the catcher.

Himmelsbach and Marshall then pulled off a double-steal, putting runners at second and third with one out.

Himmelsbach scored on a single by Hannah Williams, then Marshall scored on a bunt single by Kailee Becker to make it 2-0.

Vinton-Shellsburg put two runners on base in the bottom of the fourth with one out, but Williams made a nice catch of a fly ball to deep right field and Steffen ended the threat with a strikeout.

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Xavier added an insurance run in the seventh. Hannah Helms walked and advanced to second base on a bunt single by Charlotte Richards. Both runners advanced a base on an infield grounder, then Himmelsbach delivered a sacrifice fly to center field to make it 3-0.

Steffen fanned the first two batters in the bottom of the seventh and ended the game by catching a pop-up in the circle, throwing just as hard as she did the entire night. "Yeah, I wanted to end it real bad," she remarked.

Steffen was the hard-luck loser last year in the regional semifinals when the Saints fell to Marion, 1-0. She struck out 11 batters in that game, but the Saints could not get their offense untracked.

"We got burnt," said Steffen. "One hit, one passed ball. I felt it for a long time."

That's one of the reasons the Saints felt good about beating Vinton-Shellsburg (12-25) in a low-scoring game this time. It eased the sting a little from last year's defeat in the regional.

"It's a really good feeling," said Steffen.

Steffen, a sophomore, struggled with her control earlier this season, which is one of the reasons her ERA has jumped from 2.47 as a freshman to 4.08 this season. Gahring also thought her pitcher needed a new approach in the circle.

"I had a rough start, and then me and Coach had a talk," said Steffen. "We decided I needed to have a different mentality going into games. I had to attack the batter every time and believe I was better than them."

Gahring has enjoyed the results.

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"Unlike tonight, she's not a strikeout pitcher," the coach said. "She's a groundball/pop fly pitcher. I think when she accepted that mentality and didn't try to overpower batters and didn't try to do everything herself, once she got that mentality she's done much, much better.

"She's been much more successful, she's trusted herself and things are really coming together. She did well tonight. There's always room to improve, but she threw a very good game, hit her spots pretty well."

Olivia Richards, Charlotte Richards and Becker had two hits for Xavier Thursday night.

Pella was ranked earlier this season, but the Dutch will bring a 15-18 record into the regional semifinals Saturday night. The winner will likely face Carlisle, which is ranked No. 1 in Class 4A with a 34-6 record.