

Stokes scores 30; Lions headed back to state

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Xavier girls basketball coach Tom Lilly said if his team could have played the game without a scoreboard they might have had a chance against second-ranked Linn-Mar Tuesday night.

“We came out the first half and played like we had nothing to lose, like it was a summer league game,” he said. “Then, at the half, we looked up at the scoreboard and saw we were ahead by three. We saw the possibility of winning. It made it a different game, psychologically more than physical.”

In other words, the Saints (15-8) played the second half trying their best not to lose instead of just trying to win.

The Linn-Mar girls, meanwhile, came out of the intermission with but one mission:

Throw the ball over the top of everybody else to super-sized senior superstar Kiah Stokes and let her pop in buckets at will.

As a result, the Lions quickly erased a 19-16 halftime deficit with an 18-2 third quarter run and coasted to a 48-30 victory.

“We sort of had the jitters in the first half,” said Stokes, who scored 20 of her game-high 30 points in the last half.

“We were a little shaky, a little nervous since the game meant going to the state tournament. That always makes you nervous.”

She obviously knows the feeling.

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With the regional final win, defending state champion Linn-Mar (21-2) advances for the fourth straight year and the fifth time in the last six seasons.

The Lions face 10th-ranked Ankeny (20-3) next Wednesday at 11:45 a.m. in the opening round at the Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

"I'm very proud of these girls," said Linn-Mar Coach Mike Brandt. "We've got some young kids playing, but our seniors have been great leaders and brought us to where we are."

The 6-foot-3 Stokes, of course, is all but unstoppable if she has the ball anywhere near the basket.

She was 11 of 19 from close range Tuesday night and missed only twice in the second half.

The Saints battled her the best they could with a bevy of their tallest talent but too often ended up fouling. Stokes also sank eight of 10 free throws.

"She's like Darryl Strawberry, she stirs the drink for them," Lilly said. "It takes a lot of energy just to try and stop her."

"We did a good job in the first half pushing her out from the spots she likes so well. She's strong, and that's a lot harder than it looks."

"So the deal is, by the third quarter, we're gassed. That hurts our shooting and everything else."

Also, he pointed out, while Linn-Mar made 14 free throws, his team only shot two and missed them both.

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Turnovers and rebounding were about the same for both teams, but the Saints picked up 16 fouls and the Lions only three. Still, Lilly acknowledged, "In the second half, they shot well and we didn't. That was the difference."

For the game, the Lions (mostly Stokes) made half of their 34 field goal attempts; Xavier shot just 28 percent from the field. Stokes said it feels good to be going back to the state tourney.

"We were not going to lose this game," she said. "We stepped it up when we had to."

XAVIER (30): Annie Dale 2 0-0 5, Alex Saxen 3 0-0 6, Tyler Sampson 1 0-2 3, Emily Walvoord 0 0-0 0, Krissi Tow 3 0-0 7, Alex Bartz 2 0-0 4, Sarah Dickes 1 0-0 3, Lisa Bloomgarden 0 0-0 0, Katlyn Andersen 1 0-0 2. Rachel Wiltgen 0 0-0 0, Jennifer Murtha 0 0-0 0. Totals 13 0-2 30.

LINN-MAR (48): Mykaela Brandt 1 0-1 2, Rachel Thrune 2 0-0 4, Kailee Karr 2 0-2 4, Jenna Eells 0 2-2 2, Kiah Stokes 11 8-10 30, Shanice Cheatham 1 4-4 6, Courtney Major 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 14-19 48.

Halftime -- Xavier 19, Linn-Mar 16. 3-point goals -- Xavier 4 (Dale, Tow, Dickes, Sampson) Linn-Mar 0. Total fouls -- Xavier 16, Linn-Mar 3.