

No. 2 Lions keep Xavier in a skid

Written by Sher Jasperse

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No one could have blamed No. 14 Xavier for wishing for a little breather in its schedule after the Saints lost three consecutive heartbreakers to ranked teams in the last two weeks, dropping games to No. 3 Iowa City West, No. 4 Waterloo West and No. 11 Dowling Catholic by a combined eight points.

Instead, the road only got steeper on Friday night as the Saints played No. 2 Linn-Mar on its home court, losing 50-31 to the Metro's top team.

A stiff defensive effort kept the Saints in the game early, as they held 6-foot-3 Linn-Mar standout Kiah Stokes to four baskets in the first half and got 12 points from their bench to stay within five points, 23-18.

But the Lions (18-1, 13-1) had too many weapons, nailing five 3-pointers in the game to go with Stokes' pestering presence under the basket on both ends of the court.

"It's the kind of situation where you try to keep it close enough to get yourself an opportunity to win," said Xavier Coach Tom Lilly. "Defensively you have to hope that they don't shoot that well from the perimeter, and if they do they're a tough out because it takes quite a few bodies to stop Stokes on the inside, so I guess you pick your poison."

Stokes dropped in the first five points of the second half, then it looked as if the Saints might get a break as she went to the bench with three fouls with 4:47 to go in the period. But Jenna Eells and Mykaela Brandt both landed treys for the Lions and Xavier missed four free throws to end the period, giving Linn-Mar a 17-point advantage.

Lions Coach Mike Brandt credited his team with keeping the momentum in their favor with Stokes on the bench. "When she went out with three, the kids didn't let down. They came out and worked their offense, did a nice job of managing the ball and got really good shots."

Eells, who made three 3-pointers in a 13-point performance, said she was in her comfort zone

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all night when it came to launching the long ball, her favorite shot. "I was really relaxed whenever I had my shot open, and it was just like, take it. We knew we were going to have to step up in different areas on the court without Kiah."

Stokes, who returned for the fourth period, was held to 20 points, five below her season average, but created plenty of other headaches for the Saints with 10 blocked shots and 15 boards.

"When you go up against a kid like Stokes you know she's around somewhere," Lilly said, admitting her dominance flustered his players at times. "She's in your backyard and so you're going to be looking around and wondering where she's at."

For Xavier senior leader Alex Saxen, the loss came down to mental lapses. "Free throws – and we missed a lot of bunnies. Those are things you've got to get. When you have 6-3 standing down low and blocking you, sometimes that gets in your head, and free throws are all mental. They can be the easiest shot or the hardest shot in the game." The Saints shot a miserable 6 of 16 from the charity stripe.

Junior Alex Bartz came off the bench to lead Xavier (12-7, 8-6) with 10 points, and Saxen added eight.

The level of competition finally eases up for Xavier Tuesday when it plays at Dubuque Hempstead, a team with a losing record. Linn-Mar hosts Dubuque Senior.

XAVIER (31): Dale 1 0-0 2, Saxen 3 1-5 8, Sampson 0 0-0 0, Walvoord 1 0-2 8, Tow 0 2-4 2, Andersen 1 0-0 3, Dickes 1 1-2 4, Bartz 4 2-2 10, Boomgarden 0 0-1 0, Murtha 0 0-0 0, Wiltgen 0 0-0 0. TOTALS: 11 6-16 31.

LINN-MAR (50): Martins 0 0-0 0, Brandt 2 3-3 8, Strauel 0 0-0 0, Thrune 3 0-0 7, Karr 1 0-1 2, Cheatham 0 0-0 0, Eells 4 2-2 13, Major 0 0-0 0, Stokes 6 8-13 20. TOTALS: 16 13-19 50

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Halftime – Linn-Mar 23, Xavier 18. 3-pointers – Linn-Mar 5 (Eells 3, Thrune, Brandt), Xavier 3 (Andersen, Dickes, Saxen). Fouls – Xavier 16, Linn-Mar 13 . Fouled out – none.