

Confident Saints knock off Prairie

Written by Jim Ecker

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It took the Xavier Saints about two months to develop a new identity this season and get on a roll.

Now they hope it will carry them all the way to the Class 3A state tournament again.

The resurgent Saints marched to the foul line and topped Cedar Rapids Prairie, 60-56, in an intense Mississippi Valley Conference game at Ron Thillen Gymnasium.

The Saints have a modest 7-9 overall record at this point in the season, but they've won three straight games and have looked good in back-to-back wins over Cedar Falls and Prairie.

"We weren't playing well at the start of the year. To get a couple of wins here is great for us," said Jackson Joens, a veteran of last year's state champions. "We're just hoping to make another run down to Des Moines."

Xavier won the spirited game at the foul line, outscoring the visitors 22-3 at the charity stripe. The Saints shot 19 free throws in the second half and Prairie did not shoot any, a stat that did not escape the attention of the Hawks.

Overall for the game, the Saints hit 22 of 25 free throws and the Hawks were 3 of 4. The Saints went 9 for 10 at the foul line in the final 82 seconds to secure the victory.

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Prairie defeated Xavier by four points at Prairie last month, so Friday's outcome left them tied at 126-126 for the campaign.

"Great effort by both teams," said Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. "It was a well-played game, I thought.

"They're awfully hard to cover. They have so many guys that shoot it and have high basketball IQs and make good decisions."

Joens popped in four 3-pointers and led Xavier with 19 points, despite missing a chunk of time with minor foul problems. Matt Mims collected 15 points, five rebounds and five assists for the Saints.

Nolan Butkowski scored nine clutch points in the second half, Max Techau contributed eight points despite battling the flu, and sophomore Quinn Schulte scored seven points, all on vital free throws.

The Saints have found an identity in recent games with Quinn Schulte in the starting lineup and his older brother Reggie coming off the bench, instead of the other way around.



"He does all the intangibles," Luehrsmann said about the younger Schulte. "He's a heck of a defensive player. He gives you another ballhandler, a good decision-maker that doesn't turn it

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over.

"He doesn't play like a sophomore," said Luehrsmann. "He makes free throws when it counts. He likes being in those situations. He wants to make plays when the game is on the line."

The Saints gained a lot of confidence in their victory over Cedar Falls Tuesday night and it carried over to Friday's triumph.

We just have to stay together and keep playing the way we have," said Mims. "Hopefully we can keep getting better and make a run."

The Saints visit Waterloo East for a makeup game Saturday night.

Butkowski gave Xavier an eight-point lead at 45-37 with a 3-pointer to start the fourth quarter, but Prairie pulled within 51-48 on a driving basket by Griff Clark with about 90 seconds left.

That's when the parade to the foul line began.

Butkowski hit two free throws to make it 53-48, Quinn Schulte hit a pair to make it 55-48 and Joens made two more to make it 57-50 with 34.8 seconds left.

Keegan Murray pulled Prairie within 57-53 with a 3-pointer, but the Saints got one free throw from Quinn Schulte and two more from Mims to ice the game at 60-53 with 6.4 seconds left.

The Saints began the season with a 4-and-9 record, but they look like a different club now with a new identity. They've finally been able to put last year's success in the rear-view mirror and play good basketball again with new spirit.

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"There was a lot of pressure," said Joens. "People tried to do too much. We realize if we want to win, we have to share the ball. That's what we've done in these last couple of games."

The Saints have defeated two quality Class 4A opponents this week in Cedar Falls and Prairie (11-6).

"Great week," said Luehrsmann. "We just want to build on the positive momentum. Our goals stay the same. We just want to improve week by week and get as good as we can by the end of the year."

Max Smith Drahos led Prairie with 15 points. Jake Eilers hit four 3-pointers and scored 12. Clark finished with 11 points.

PRAIRIE (56): Ke.Murray 2 0-0 6, Lorenz 0 0-0 0, Clark 5 0-1 11, Kr.Murray 2 2-2 7, Smith Drahos 7 0-0 15, Eilers 4 0-0 12, Usher 1 1-2 3, Kilpatrick 0 0-0 0, Serbousek 1 0-0 2. Totals 22 3-4 56.

XAVIER (60): Lux 0 0-0 0, Mims 6 2-4 15, Butkowski 2 4-4 9, Joens 4 7-7 19, Q.Schulte 0 7-8 7, Techau 3 2-2 8, B.Schulte 1 0-0 2. Totals 16 22-25 60.

Halftime - Prairie 27, Xavier 26. 3-point goals - Prairie 9 (Eilers 4, Ke.Murray 2, Clark 1, Kr.Murray 1, Smith Drahos 1), Xavier 6 (Joens 4, Mims 1, Butkowski 1).