

Defense rules as Cougars trim Saints

Written by Jim Ecker

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For most of the game Tuesday night, it looked like the Xavier Saints and Kennedy Cougars should have been sent back to their locker rooms to change into knee socks, short shorts and high-top sneakers.

It looked like basketball from a long time ago, with lots of bumps and bruises and precious few points.

"That was ugly basketball," said Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. "Competitive basketball, but we set basketball back about 40 years with how ugly that was."

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, of course, and Kennedy was perfectly happy to return to the other end of 42nd Street after trimming the Saints, 50-47, at Xavier.

Xavier made only four baskets in the first half and trailed, 18-16, at intermission. The Saints trailed 31-23 heading into the fourth quarter and it was nearly time to check the record books for futility.

Fortunately, both teams clicked in the fourth period and it became fun to watch. Incredibly, the Saints scored 24 points in the fourth quarter alone after netting only 23 points in the first three periods combined.

"It was a grind," agreed Kennedy Coach Jon McKowen. "Our defense kept us in it. We're

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starting to defend really well.

"When you're playing a team this good two miles away," he said, "it's going to be tough."

The Saints (8-10) trailed by 10 points, 29-19, late in the third period before finally getting untracked. They grabbed a 44-42 lead on a 3-pointer by Nolan Butkowski and took a 47-44 lead on a 3-pointer by Jackson Joens with 90 seconds left, but the home team never scored again.

Matt Mims, who played all 32 minutes for Xavier, missed the front end of a one-and-one with 46 seconds left and the Saints clinging to a one-point lead at 47-46.

Jackson Foley missed a 3-pointer for Kennedy with about 10 seconds left, but Malik Haynes snared the offensive rebound and gave the Cougars a 48-47 edge, prompting McKowen to call his final timeout to set his defense with six seconds to go.



The Saints, in a hurry, threw the ball away and fouled Drake Brewster with 1.5 seconds remaining. Brewster made both free throws to give Kennedy a 50-47 margin and Luehrsmann called his last timeout to diagram what needed to be a miracle.

He almost got it.

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Bryce Schulte, the all-star quarterback for the Xavier football team, fired the inbounds pass to Joens near the mid-court stripe to give the Saints a final chance. Joens turned and shot the ball right at the basket from about 40 feet, but the ball hit the rim and bounced away.

Luehrsmann liked the way his team responded in the fourth quarter.

"We just played without fear and played relaxed and played loose," he said. "We just stepped up and finally made some shots, and when we did that we were in pretty good shape."

Luehrsmann also liked the way his team played defense for most of the game.

"We're getting better," he said. "We're becoming a very good defensive team. It's something we have to continue to build on and hang our hat on."

Kennedy is well-known for its sticky defense and Tuesday's game was a prime example.

"The way they competed and played defense, it was at a whole other level," said Luehrsmann, praising the Cougars. "As I told the guys, it's great preparation for us, because there are few teams that get out and pressure like Kennedy does."

"They're blessed with really good athletes," he said. "They sub in guys that are every bit as quick and athletic as the guys they're taking off the floor and it does wear on you. It's hard to make plays when you need to the most."

Diggins led Kennedy with 18 points. Drake Brewster finished with 10.

Joens hit a series of clutch 3-pointers for Xavier in the second half and finished with 16 points. Mims scored 11 points for the Saints. Butkowski also hit clutch shots in the second half and

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scored 10 for Xavier.

Max Techau, who began his high school career at Kennedy, got into foul trouble and scored eight points for Xavier. The Saints hurt their chances by missing 11 of 19 free throws.

KENNEDY (50): Haynes 2 4-4 9, Brewster 2 6-6 10, Harris 1 0-0 2, Berst 3 1-2 8, Jenkins 0 0-0 0, Diggins 8 2-4 18, Foley 1 0-0 3, Wetzel 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 13-16 50.

XAVIER (47): Lux 0 1-2 1, Mims 3 3-5 11, Butkowski 3 1-2 10, Joens 6 0-1 16, Q.Schulte 0 1-4 1, Techau 3 2-5 8, Johnson 0 0-0 0, B.Schulte 0 0-0 0. Totals 15 8-19 47.

Halftime - Kennedy 18, Xavier 16. 3-point goals - Kennedy 3 (Haynes 1, Berst 1, Foley 1), Xavier 9 (Joens 4, Butkowski 3, Mims 2).