

No.3 Lions escape Saints with strong finish

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 22 January 2012 01:29 -

Jimmy Roth popped in five 3-pointers and scored a career-high 23 points Saturday night to help Linn-Mar survive a big scare against the Xavier Saints.

Just think what he might have accomplished if the referees hadn't called a phantom foul against him, causing him to miss the final 4 minutes and 41 seconds of the first half.

The third-ranked Lions rallied in the final two minutes and topped the Saints, 70-61, in a spirited Mississippi Valley Conference battle at Xavier.

One of the officials blew his whistle with 4:41 left in the second quarter and called a foul on No. 21, which was Roth, when in reality the foul was by No. 31, which was Andy Henry. The mistake sent Roth to the bench with two fouls, when he should have been able to stay comfortably on the floor with just one foul.

The referees huddled at halftime, agreed it was a mistake and changed the call, but the error cost Roth a big chunk of playing time in the first half and cost the Lions a big chunk of their offense. Roth had scored 14 points at the time of the phantom foul, leading Linn-Mar to a 29-14 lead, but the Saints rallied and pulled within 37-30 at halftime with Roth sitting unfairly on the bench.

"It was tough," said Roth.

Roth and Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson both told the officials it was a mistake at the time, but it wasn't fixed until intermission.

"We didn't think that foul was on him," said Robertson. "I appreciate they corrected it, but I wish they had corrected it at the time. We sure would have liked to have him on the floor."

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The Saints (4-8, 3-4) finished the first half with confidence and a burst of energy. They kept surging in the second half even with Roth on the floor.

Xavier vaulted into a 49-45 lead on a bucket by Ben McDermott late in the third quarter. The Saints grabbed another four-point lead at 57-53 on a 3-pointer by Brian Ropp with 4:45 left in the game, putting an upset within reach.

Roth tied the game, 59-59, with a 3-pointer from the corner with 2:52 remaining, but Tanner Frazier gave the Saints a 61-59 edge with two free throws with 2:38 left. The Saints had All-American Marcus Paige and the third-ranked Lions in trouble, but the visitors wiggled away.

Roth hit another 3-pointer to give Linn-Mar a 62-61 lead with 2:03 left, igniting an 11-0 run to finish the game. Zach Martins hit a 3-pointer to make it 65-61 and Paige nailed four straight free throws to make it 69-61 with 43.4 seconds to go. Martins hit a foul shot with 28.3 seconds left to finish the scoring.

Suddenly, Xavier's 61-59 advantage had become a 61-70 disadvantage in the space of 95 seconds. The Saints did not score in the last 2:37 of the ballgame.

"They hit their shots. They started executing, and we had some costly turnovers at the end," said Xavier forward Kevin Hosch. "It kind of got us out of our rhythm a little bit."

The Saints did everything but win the game. Paige finished with 21 points, but he had only 12 points entering the fourth quarter thanks to excellent defense by Xavier.

The Saints used a variety of defenses with a man-to-man, straight zone and box-and-one, keeping a fresh man on Paige and keeping him under wraps much of the game. "They did throw us off for awhile, and that was a great game plan by Xavier," said Paige.

North Carolina Coach Roy Williams attended the game to watch his prized recruit. Paige

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delivered in the clutch with his future coach in the stands, but Roth was the guy who gave the Lions the biggest boost of all.

"He was huge for us tonight," said Paige. "Our offense was a little out of synch. They threw a couple of different junk defenses at us and it kind of got us out of our flow."

"He really kept us in the game for awhile for that big stretch. And once we were able to get stops and other people finally hit some shots at the end, we pulled away."

Martins hit three 3-pointers and scored 12 points for Linn-Mar (9-2, 5-2).

Xavier Coach Matt Jenkins used an effective nine-man rotation and got important contributions from all nine guys. The Saints got 27 points from their reserves, whipping the Lions in bench points 27-5 and giving their team a chance to win.

"It's disappointing that we didn't pull it off," said Hosch. "Our bench came out and really sparked us and got some turnovers and hit some shots. They were great."

The Xavier super-subs were Matt Nelson (9 points), Frazier (8), Ropp (7) and Alec Clasen (3). Ben McDermott led a balanced attack with 10 points, with Mack Matke contributing nine points and Trey Sampson adding seven markers.

"We did a great job, for the most part," said Jenkins. "We made a lot of progress in this game."

"Of course we're disappointed in not winning the game, but there are a lot of positives that out-weigh the negatives. For us, we saw a lot of progress tonight."

Linn-Mar made 11 3-pointers with five by Roth, three by Paige and three by Martins. Xavier

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made only two 3-pointers.

LINN-MAR (70): Martins 4 1-3 12, Paige 6 6-7 21, Roth 9 0-0 23, Henry 2 0-1 4, Gogg 2 1-1 5, Schlotterback 2 0-0 4, Meier 0 0-0 0, Dick 0 1-2 1. Totals 25 9-14 70.

XAVIER (61): Sampson 3 0-0 7, McDermott 2 6-9 10, Hosch 1 1-2 3, Valentine 2 1-2 5, Mattke 4 1-1 9, Nelson 3 3-3 9, Ropp 1 4-4 7, Frazier 2 4-4 8, Clasen 1 1-2 3. Totals 19 21-27 61.

Halftime - Linn-Mar 37, Xavier 30. 3-point goals - Linn-Mar 11 (Roth 5, Paige 3, Martins 3), Xavier 2 (Sampson 1, Ropp 1). Technical foul - Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson.