

Marion upsets No.15 Saints in regional

Written by Jim Ecker

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Maybe the Marion Indians were too young to be nervous Saturday night against the 15th-ranked Xavier Saints. Or maybe they simply didn't care how young they are.

The Indians had an eighth grader at shortstop. They had another eighth grader behind the plate. They have only one senior on the team and she bats ninth. Yet they all played like season veterans in the biggest game of the year so far.

The young Indians upset the Saints, 1-0, in the Class 4A regional semifinals at Bob Erusha Field and now are one victory away from reaching the state tournament for only the second time in school history.

"They're a great bunch of kids," said Marion Coach Kim Knapp. "They've worked hard all season. We had a goal, to get to state. They're just hard workers."

Marion (22-14) will face Pella (20-13) in the regional finals Tuesday at 7 p.m. at Indianola, with the winner advancing to the state tournament in Fort Dodge. Pella upset second-ranked Indianola, 4-0, Saturday night as a

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pair of underdogs advanced to meet each other.

Xavier lost in the regional semifinals at home for the third straight year and retired with a 24-16 record.

Marion sophomore Alicia Steepleton tossed a four-hit shutout in what turned into a pitcher's duel against Xavier freshman Maria Steffen, who pitched a two-hitter with nine strikeouts. The Indians scored in the fifth inning on a single, a sacrifice bunt, a wild pitch and a ground ball for the only run in the ballgame.



Steepleton had to escape mild jams in the third and fourth innings, when the Saints put runners in scoring position, but she got a big out every time she needed it.

"I feel really good," said Steepleton. "The team backed me up really well. I just felt like we did it as a team and not just one person."

The Indians made a pair of sparkling plays in the bottom of the seventh inning. Xavier catcher Steph Wehr lined a would-be base hit to right field, but Marion right fielder Camryn Cannoy threw her out at first base for the second out. Claire Christianson then lined a shot to center field, but Marion center fielder Bayley Fuller dropped to her knees to snag the final out.

Some young players may have wilted under the pressure, but not these Indians.

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"We just stay as a team," said Steepleton. "We don't go off by ourselves. We don't get too over-confident about some of the games. We just stay in our own little circle and play as a team."

Coach Knapp thought her club managed to shove its jitters aside and play a good game. "They were nervous. I could tell they were nervous a little bit," she said, "but they're fighters."

Marion placed sixth in the Class 2A state tournament in 1999 in its only trip to the state meet, compiling a 1-2 record. This is the first time that Knapp has led the Indians to the regional finals in her seven years as head coach.

For the Saints, it was another disappointing end to a promising season. Xavier has compiled an 86-34 record the last three years, but has lost in the regional semifinals each time.

"We just didn't make the adjustments soon enough," said Coach Nikki Gahring. "We wanted to make more adjustments quicker. We hit the ball hard at times, but it went right at them. That's kind of how it falls sometimes."

"Maria (Steffen) threw a great game. She threw well, we played good defense behind her. I key hit here or there and it's a totally different story."

Senior Erin Drahozal normally might have pitched for the Saints Saturday night, but Drahozal has been bothered by a sore right shoulder and served as the designated player. But it would have been hard for Drahozal to have done any better than Steffen, who pitched a superb game.

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Steepleton led off the top of the fifth inning with a clean single and was replaced at first base by Livvy Draves, a courtesy runner for the pitcher.

Shannon Sellers bunted Draves to second base, then Draves advanced to third on a wild pitch with one out.

Draves scored on a ground ball up the middle by Madison Wilson, who was retired at first base on a good fielding play by Xavier shortstop Hannah Helms, who had no chance of getting Draves at the plate.

Steepleton made the lone run stand up.

"She did great today. I'm very proud of her," said Coach Knapp. "Sometimes she's on with her spots and sometimes she's not. And tonight she was on with her spots. So that helps a ton."

Steepleton collected three strikeouts, all in the first two innings, and walked only one batter.

"Alicia pitched very well," said Maddie Knapp, the eighth grader shortstop and coach's daughter. "She really held us together."

"I felt it was a really good team effort," said Knapp. "We really came together. We wanted it bad."

Xavier fans grew increasingly nervous as the game moved along and the Indians were matching the Saints pitch-for-pitch and play-for-play.

"That definitely gives a team life when you let them hang around and give them hope that some things can fall their way," said Gahring, who is due with her first baby any day now. "Some things fell their way in the same inning and the run scored."

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Gahring is 0-for-3 in the regional semifinals as Xavier's head coach. She had no answer for the three-time jinx, but wondered if drawing a first-round bye in the tournament played a role this year. Marion beat Vinton-Shellsburg, 4-3, in the opening round and had a game under its belt before facing the Saints.

"I've said before that having a bye is a great thing, but I also think having a bye the first round can also be a curse," she remarked. "You get the first-game tightness/jitters out in that first-round game."

"Compared to how Marion played Thursday night (against Vinton) and watching them, they were a lot tighter that game. They were not as sharp that game."

Morgan Breitbach had two of Xavier's four hits. Neither team committed an early in the snappy 75-minute game.

Marion 000 010 0 - 1 2 0

Xavier 000 000 0 - 0 4 0

W - Steepleton. L - Steffen.