

Burger helps Saints topple Spirit Lake

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - Mitchell Burger plays basketball like he's Jimmy Cagney in one of those old tough-guy movies from the 1930's, where Cagney struts around with a big chip on his shoulder and proves to the world that he's just as good as anybody.

That was Burger in his unusual role of super-sub in the Class 3A state basketball tournament Tuesday night, strutting around Wells Fargo Arena and acting like he didn't have a care in the world.

Burger returned from a two-game suspension and poured in 25 points as the 10th-ranked Xavier Saints stumped No. 3 Spirit Lake, 58-47, in the quarterfinals to keep their season alive for two more games.

The Saints (17-8) will face top-ranked Pella (23-1) in the semifinals at 8:15 p.m. Thursday, and win or lose they'll play again on Saturday.

Burger did not start against Spirit Lake, but he picked up right where he left off three games ago and sparked the Saints to a 29-19 lead at intermission. And on the defensive end, the Saints threw a blanket over 6-foot-10 center Ryan Kriener and kept the future Iowa Hawkeye under wraps most of the night.

"I'm really happy with our team effort tonight," said coach Ryan Luehrsmann, who has led the

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Saints to the 3A semifinals for the second straight year. "We did a terrific job defensively, probably our best defensive effort of the year."

Kriener scored 18 points, but needed two 3-pointers in the final minute when the game was essentially over to get there. And Spirit Lake guard Billy Brown, another big scorer, finished with only 11 points.

Kriener and Brown both average better than 22 points per game and have combined for more than 70 in some contests, but the Saints kept them well below their combined marks.

Meanwhile, Burger stole the show for Xavier. He entered the game with 3:56 left in the first quarter, made a hard-charging three-point play about a minute later and was back to being his normally aggressive self.

"Mitch is just a really tough kid," Luehrsmann said. "He's got a big heart, loves to compete, so it didn't surprise me that he came out and played the inspired game that he did."



"It was a situation where I think he's learned a lot through the last week or so, just things that young guys need to do to grown up and become better adults, and he's just a kid yet."

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"We're just really happy that we were able to get him back and I'm thrilled with the way he was able to perform tonight."

Burger, a feisty senior who is generously listed in the program at 5-foot-11, missed the Class 3A district finals and the Class 3A substate championship game while serving an in-house suspension for an unspecified violation of rules.

He managed to shake it off, focus on the task and play a magnificent game.

"I just came into the game wanting to play as hard as possible," he remarked. "I'm just blessed to have another chance to play and I'm happy that I had another chance. I just wanted to make the most of it and go as hard as I could.

"I think I've learned a lot through the experience," he said. "I'm really blessed to have another chance and I'm happy to be out on the floor with my teammates."

Burger hit 8 of 14 shots from the field, including a pair of steals and layups, and nailed three 3-pointers on his way to netting 25 points in 26 minutes.

"We haven't seen him before," Spirit Lake coach David Smith said. "We just know from all the coaches we've talked to, he's a heck of a talent out there. I don't know about all the off-the-court stuff, but he's an unbelievable player and he's really tough to guard."

Burger outplayed Brown, the Spirit Lake guard who will play in college at North Dakota.

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"From watching film from when he's in the game, he didn't really take us by surprise," said Brown, who fouled out. "We knew we was a great player. We knew what we were coming into. He hit shots and he played a great game."

Xavier took control of the game by out-scoring Spirit Lake, 16-5, in the second quarter. The Saints held Kriener to just two points in the first half and made him look ordinary.

Max Techau and Ryan Stulken, who both stand 6-foot-7, did a terrific job of keeping the big guy quiet.

"We knew we couldn't let one guy guard him," Techau said. "We had to front him first, and every time he touched the ball we had to send two and sometimes three guys at him. I think we did a really good job."

Kriener finally gave up trying to establish himself in the low post and moved to the perimeter to find shots. He did shake loose for a dunk to cap a 9-0 run as Spirit Lake chopped a 36-21 deficit down to 36-30, but Matt Mims hit two free throws for Xavier to stop the bleeding and Spirit Lake never got any closer the rest of the game.

"I thought the first half they came out and played really hard," said Kriener, saluting the Saints. "They really double-downed and threw three guys at me a lot. They made it hard."

Stulken finished with 12 points and seven rebounds. Mims played a steady game at point guard and contributed seven points, seven assists, six rebounds and four steals. Techau also scored seven points.

Spirit Lake, making its first trip to the state tournament since 1942, finished 21-4.

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XAVIER (58): Mims 2 3-4 7, Butkowski 1 1-2 4, Joens 1 0-0 3, Stulken 3 5-6 12, Techau 3 0-0 7, Burger 8 6-9 25, Fettkether 0 0-0 0, Whitten 0 0-0 0, Dempewolf 0 0-0 0, B.Schulte 0 0-0 0, Houtakker 0 0-0 0, Johnson 0 0-0 0. Totals 18 15-21 58.

SPIRIT LAKE (47): Brown 4 2-2 11, Backhaus 2 0-2 4, Kriener 6 4-7 18, Ramos 2 0-0 6, Smith 0 0-0 0, Walz 0 0-0 0, Christensen 0 0-0 0, Heitritter 2 2-2 8, Dykstra 0 0-0 0, Olsen 0 0-0 0, Van Dyke 0 0-0 0, Vugteveen 0 0-0 0, Seemann 0 0-0 0. Totals 16 8-13 47.

Halftime - Xavier 29, Spirit Lake 19. 3-point goals - Xavier 7 (Burger 3, Butkowski 1, Joens 1, Stulken 1, Techau 1), Spirit Lake 7 (Kriener 2, Ramos 2, Heitritter 2, Brown 1). Fouled out - Techau, Brown.