

DES MOINES - The Xavier Saints like being the underdog.

They relish it, embrace, thrive on it.

That's good, because the Saints will be big underdogs Thursday night when they face top-ranked Waverly-Shell Rock in the semifinals of the Class 3A state basketball tournament.

The Saints reached the semifinals Tuesday afternoon when they whipped fourth-ranked Mount Pleasant, 59-44, in the opening round at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

Xavier (14-11) and Waverly-Shell Rock (23-1) will tangle Thursday at 6:35 p.m.

Waverly-Shell Rock dumped the Saints by 22 points, 76-54, when they met in Waverly in the second game of the season Dec. 3.

"We learned that they're really freaking good," Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann said when asked about the Go-Hawks. "They've got a big-time player in (Austin) Phyfe and a bunch of tough, competitive kids.

"We're just hoping that we can give them a good game on Thursday night. I think they're playing

at a very high level right now."

Phyfe, a 6-foot-10 senior who has signed with Northern Iowa, is averaging 19 points and 13 rebounds for Waverly-Shell Rock and could be a load for Xavier. But the Saints faced an impressive big man last year when they defeated Cordell Pemsl and Dubuque Wahlert in the Class 3A state championship game, so they've been in this spot before.

"We have to send a lot of guys at him and not let him get comfortable and take away what he likes to do most," said Max Techau, a 6-foot-7 senior who will have the primary job of guarding Phyfe.

Luehrsmann is baffled by the slow starts and had a hard time trying to pinpoint the problem.

"I don't know, but we better figure it out in a hurry because we have a juggernaut coming at us on Thursday night," he said.

"I think we have to settle into the game a little bit quicker and be a little more patient on the offensive end. I felt like we took quite a few quick shots early in the possession to start out the game. That was an adjustment we made in the second half."

The Saints shot 9 for 23 from the floor in the first half, but they sizzled in the second half by sinking 14 of 18 shots for a remarkable 77.8 percent in the last 16 minutes.

Techau finished with 20 points, seven rebounds and two blocked shots. Matt Mims contributed 17 points and six assists with another solid all-around performance.

Jackson Joens scored 10 points for the Saints. Nolan Butkowski scored only four points, but he had seven rebounds and seven assists. Quinn Schulte scored five points and played well on defense against Mount Pleasant star Brady Sartorius.

Gabe Lux, who had made only one 3-pointer in 10 tries all season, hit a big triple in the second quarter to pull the Saints within 23-20.

Sartorius, averaging 22 points, scored 19 points for Mount Pleasant, but he hit only 7 of 17 shots from the field and was only 1 for 5 on 3-pointers.

Tom O'Connor, a 6-foot-9 foreign exchange student from Australia, had 10 points and 10 rebounds for Mount Pleasant, but he spent a good chunk of the second half on the bench when the Panthers tried to press with a smaller lineup.

O'Connor, a big man, appeared to get tired midway through the third quarter when the Saints scored nine straight points for a 33-25 lead.

"We wanted to run," said Luehrsmann. "I think maybe we took his legs out a little bit in the second half.

"He's a very talented kid, very skilled. God, I'd like to pick up a foreign exchange student like that. That would make me a better coach."

The Saints led by 18 points with 1:14 left in the game before settling for the 15-point victory. Mount Pleasant was averaging 72.6 points per game, but the Saints held them 28 points under their norm.

