

Sharma helps Lions stifle Saints

Written by Tom Fruehling

Wednesday, 11 February 2015 00:02 -



Linn-Mar senior Niki Sharma is the kind of basketball player every good team needs.

"She does all those things that don't show up on the stat sheet," said her coach Jaime (Printy) Brandt Tuesday night after the resurgent Lions (14-7) smothered Xavier, 42-24, on the Saints' home floor.

A lithe and nimble 5-foot-11 forward, Sharma looks to others first, passes with precision, handles the ball easily and guards tenaciously. She's also like a ringmaster on the court, directing traffic and shouting encouragement.

"Nikita's the glue that holds everything together out there," Brandt said.

And this on a team that just two weeks ago looked as though everything was falling apart. The 38-36 loss to Xavier at home Jan. 27 marked the sixth straight defeat for a squad once ranked as high as fifth in the Class 5A polls.

The Lions have now won four in a row.

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"This is a completely different team than it was two weeks ago," Brandt explained. "Our team chemistry on and off the court is much improved.

We're playing unselfishly and sharing the ball better.

"We had some team meetings, regrouped and I think everyone is on the same page now."

Sharma, whose nine points shared scoring honors Tuesday with former AAU teammate Amanda Ollinger, said togetherness is the key to her team's turnaround.

"We're playing a lot better both offensively and defensively," she said. "We're communicating more on defense. And on offense, we're all looking for the open person.

"We're just playing more like a team. Things are looking up and I think we're peaking at just the right time."

She got no argument from Xavier Coach Tom Lilly.

He acknowledged that his Class 4A seventh ranked Saints (14-6) didn't play very well, making only nine field goals out of 34 attempts (26 percent) and getting out-rebounded 23 to 13. "But give all credit to Linn-Mar," he said graciously.

"They've got a great team and a lot of talent. And tonight they beat us in every facet of the game.

"We just had our hat handed to us. They were bigger, faster and stronger."

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Both coaches said the difference was defense.

Xavier was held scoreless for five minutes in the second quarter, while Linn-Mar ran off nine straight points. Another five-minute drought in the third quarter led to an 8-0 Lion spurt.

"That's the best defensively we've played all year," said Brandt. "We played tremendous help defense."

Sharma, who played rapaciously all over the floor, said the Lions identified Xavier's top scorers and kept them in check by sharing the load.

The Saints' Lizzy Bailey, who was averaging 14.1 points, was held scoreless. McKenna Andersen made just one 3-pointer, six points below her average. Only sparkplug senior Morgan Breitbach with a team-high 10 points shot her normal game.

"They took away our fast-break opportunities and then didn't let us shoot," said Lilly. "Everything we tried to, they would have none of it."

"We've played a lot of top 5A teams, and if they play defense like they did tonight they're going to be a tough off for anybody. Their ship seemed to be listing for awhile. But I think they've got the ship righted now."

LINN-MAR (42): Lexi Frese 0 0-0 0, Olivia Montague 2 0-0 5, Niki Sharma 4 1-1 9, Kamryn Finley 2 0-0 4, Amanda Ollinger 3 2-2 9, Brittney Lancial 0 1-2 1, Megan Murphy 2 0-0 5, Claire Larson 0 3-4 3, Lannie Nietert 2 2-2 6, Natalie Ross 0 0-0 0, Brooke Lorenz 0 0-0 0, Allie Noggle 0 0-0 0, Alie Akers 0 0-0 0. Totals 15 9-11 42.

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XAVIER (24): Lizzy Bailey 0 0-0 0, McKenna Andersen 1 0-0 3, Morgan Breitbach 3 4-4 10, Amelia Ivester 1 0-0 2, Meghan Joens 0 0-0 0, Lexi Noonan 3 0-0 6, Jenny Dickes 0 0-0 0, Erin Drahozal 0 0-0 0, Brylee Bastian 0 0-0 0, Kiana Stanek 1 0-0 3, Kaitlyn Albert 0 0-0 0, Claire Christianson 0 0-0 0, Madi Nelson 0 0-0 0, Maddie Kadlec 0 0-0 0, Kylie Brown 0 0-0 0, Maddie Stovie 0 0-0 0. Totals 9 4-4 24.

Halftime – Linn-Mar 23, Xavier 13. 3-point goals – Linn-Mar 3 (Murphy 1, Montague 1, Ollinger 1), Xavier 2 (Andersen 1, Stanek 1).