

Gutsy Saints fall to No.4 Senior

Written by Tom Fruehling

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DUBUQUE – If points were scored for gutsy play, the Xavier boys might well be playing in next week's Class 4A substate final.

Too bad, but grit doesn't show up in the boxscore.

The undersized, overachieving Saints more than held their own for three quarters Friday night against once-defeated, fourth-ranked Dubuque Senior. In the end, they simply ran out of gas and stalled out 55-39.

Far shorter than the Rams to begin with, Xavier was forced to play all but seven minutes in the first three periods without sole big man Matt Nelson. The 6-foot-8 junior picked up his second foul with three minutes to go in the opening quarter, sat out the rest of the half with his third foul at the 7:25 mark and went down again when called for his fourth just 20 seconds after coming back in during the third quarter.

Although he finished the game, Nelson was shuttled in only to play offense for most of the fourth quarter. While averaging 11 points a game, he scored his only two points of the game on free throws with 4:42 remaining.

With the only Saint over 6-4 on the bench, it was left to his much smaller teammates to contend with a Dubuque Senior starting lineup that had two 6-5 players, one that's 6-7 and another at 6-9. And if they sat down, players just as big and burly came in to replace them.

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“Very few teams can match up with Senior with all their size,” said Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. “They’re like a college team.

“For us to compete with that, it’s very difficult when our 6-foot-8 post man is playing just six minutes of the game.

“That’s hard to counteract for four quarters.”

And it didn’t help the cause when hard-nosed, hustling senior Corbin Woods was also plagued with foul trouble and was tagged with his fifth barely into the fourth quarter.

For the game, Xavier was called for 21 fouls and Senior 12.

The Rams made 23 of 29 free throws, while the Saints were just four of six.

Speaking of the huge disparity, Luehrsmann would only comment, “Let’s just say the game was definitely called in their favor.”

Moreover, he added, “And they didn’t need any more help.”

Whether the outcome would have been any different with Nelson not languishing on the bench, it’s hard to say.

But, according to his coach, “It made it extremely tough for us.

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“Matt is a big part of our offense, both for setting screens and drawing double teams. It would have been nice to have him out there, but that’s the game.”

Besides his scoring, Nelson also led the Saints this year in rebounding at seven a game.

Even without him, the plucky Saints fought tooth-and-nail on the boards for all but the last few minutes when the contest got out of hand.

Unflappable senior sharpshooter Trey Sampson opened the tilt with two 3-pointers, and Xavier held Senior to only five points in the first quarter.

The Rams didn’t score a field goal for the first five minutes of the second quarter but stayed close from the free throw line.

Xavier sophomore Calvin Winker hit a buzzer beater at the half to put the Saints ahead 22-19.

For Luehrsmann, the game was reminiscent of their first matchup with Senior in late January, when his team led by seven at half only to lose 42-34.

“Early on we were fighting and clawing, and we had them on their heels,” he said. “But we just wore out.”

Woods was whistled for his fourth foul with 4:15 left in the third quarter on a charge and the layup he made was called off. A three-point Senior lead soon grew to 11 on an 8-0 run, and the Rams closed out the game at the free throw line.

“I’m very, very proud of this team,” said Luehrsmann of the group that finished his first season at Xavier with a 11-12 record. “They put everything they had in every game all season. This

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game typified the group. They played with great effort and toughness right to the end.

“And this senior class of kids provided leadership and character. It set the tone for my first year in coaching.”

XAVIER (39): Calvin Winker 3 0-0 6, Trey Sampson 4 0-0 11, Adam McDermott 2 0-0 5, Matt Nelson 0 2-2 2, Corbin Woods 2 0-0 4, Andrew Bisenius 1 0-0 3, Reggie Schulte 1 2-2 4, Robbie Thinnies 2 0-2 4, Patrick Mullin 0 0-0 0, Greg Foxhaven 0 0-0 0. Totals 15 4-6 39.

DUBUQUE SENIOR (55): Kyle Holdridge 1 1-3 3, Kyle Haber 4 6-6 16, Josh Weeber 1 7-8 9, Seth Bonifas 3 4-4 10, Lucas Legrand 1 3-4 5, Keegan Gallery 0 0-0 0, Luka Bozek 1 2-2 4, Luke McDonnell 4 0-2 8, Sam Noel 0 0-0 0, Israel Reeves 0 0-0 0, Taylor Donner 0 0-0 0, Parker Hammel 0 0-0 0. Totals 15 23-29 55.

Halftime - Xavier 22, Dubuque Senior 19. 3-point goals – Xavier 5 (Sampson 3, McDermott, Bisenius), Dubuque Senior 2 (Haber 2). Total fouls – Xavier 21, Dubuque Senior 12. Fouled out – Woods.