

McLaughlin takes over in OT for Xavier boys

Written by Kelly Terpstra, Ottumwa Courier

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OTTUMWA -- The mark of a true competitor is to never back down, come ready to play and fear no one.

The Cedar Rapids Xavier boys hoops squad got the memo.

The Saints (7-15) and Coach Matt Jenkins made the long haul down to Wapello County and promptly knocked off the Ottumwa Bulldogs, 61-54, in overtime in a Class 4A substate quarterfinal at Evans Middle School Monday night.

"Our guys just made plays. That's what it boils down to. Guys gutted it out. We sensed the moment," said Jenkins.

Up next for the Saints is the top dog in the state, in the form of undefeated and top-ranked Linn-Mar (21-0) in the substate semifinals Friday night at Linn-Mar.

Xavier is no stranger to its league rival. It played the top power in the large-school class twice and lost by 19 and 20 points, although the Saints were tied at halftime in the first fray.

"They are a phenomenal team. We wouldn't have it any other way," said Jenkins. "To be the best, you've got to beat the best. We'll see what happens."

Xavier senior point guard Mitch McLaughlin drained seven free throws in the extra session and accounted for nine points in overtime. McLaughlin talked about playing in the extremely strong Mississippi Valley Conference,- a big reason the Saints came ready to play right off the bat.

"Everyone asked, 'What's wrong with your record?' We kind of just ignored it. We knew we were better than what we were showing," said McLaughlin, who finished with a game-high 19 points.

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Xavier had a chance to win it in regulation after the Saints' trapping defense forced a Bulldog turnover. Mack Mattke's long 3-pointer misfired, but Kevin Hosch just missed a tip-in right before the fourth-quarter horn sounded.

For the Ottumwa Bulldogs (9-13), losers of nine out of their last 12 games to close the season, it was one that slipped away.

Ottumwa trailed by as many as 19 points in the first half, with Xavier taking a commanding 27-8 lead at the 3:26 mark of the second period. But the Bulldogs, as they have all season, showed they had plenty of might and a whole lot of bite.

Ottumwa stormed back to cut Xavier's lead to 28-16 at the break. Ben Kramer's two free throws --- he made 10 straight at one point -- capped an 8-0 run and suddenly Ottumwa was down just one, 33-32, with just over a minute left in the third.

Kramer was 0-for-10 from the field, but was playing his first game back after sitting out against Dowling Catholic in the regular-season finale because of an injury sustained against Mount Pleasant. Two more Kramer free throws tied it at 34-34 with 24 ticks left on the third-quarter clock.

"I wasn't satisfied at all up 19, because I knew they were going to make a run," said McLaughlin. "The credit goes to them. They came back. We just had to weather the storm."

Ottumwa junior swingman Erik Thorgaard's 3-pointer from the top of the key 20 seconds into the fourth quarter gave the Bulldogs their first lead of the game. The score was now in the Bulldogs' favor at 37-34 and the red-and-white partisan crowd roared in admiration.

Ottumwa maintained control of the fourth-quarter lead for the majority of the period and led 49-43 after a Kramer free throw with 1:37 left. But Xavier's trapping and pressing defense got the Saints back in the game.

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Alec Clasen's steal and layup in transition with 48 seconds left tied it at 49-49. The score would remain that way into overtime.

Ottumwa was lethargic in the first half and trailed by scores of 9-0 and 14-1 at one point. The Bulldogs were playing their third game in the last four days.

"We looked a little slow tonight. We just didn't come out very sharp," said Ottumwa Coach Chris Gravett. "We weren't ready to play. This was a game we didn't deserve to win, even if we would have won."

Thorgaard paced Ottumwa with 16 points and drained four 3-pointers. Faith Pope, who sat on the bench with foul trouble for most of the third quarter, had another productive game. The sophomore power forward ended up with 14 points.

Ottumwa senior guard Zach Throckmorton was clutch with 12 points and nailed two from long range. Kramer ended up with 10 points.

There will be zero pressure for Jenkins and his Linn County squad when they attempt to tackle Linn-Mar Friday night. "We have nothing to lose," said McLaughlin.

XAVIER (61): McLaughlin 3 12-16 19, Mains 4 2-3 10, McDermott 4 0-0 10, Clasen 3 1-2 7, Hosch 1 5-10 7, Mattke 1 4-6 7, Valentine 0 1-2 1, Dunkirk 0 0-0 0, Ropp 0 0-0 0. Totals 16 25-39 61.

OTTUMWA (54): Thorgaard 6 0-0 16, Pope 5 4-6 14, Throckmorton 5 0-0 12, Kramer 0 10-14 10, Jay 1 0-0 2, Allen 0 0-0 0, VanFleet 0 0-0 0, Hardie 0 0-0 0, McDonald 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 14-20 54.

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Halftime -- Xavier 28, Ottumwa 16. Regulation -- Xavier 49, Ottumwa 49. 3-point goals -- Xavier 4 (McDermott 2, McLaughlin, Mattke), Ottumwa 6 (Thorgaard 4, Throckmorton 2).