

Gardner's 3 TDs spark Saints to 4A final

Written by Jim Ecker

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CEDAR FALLS - Wes Gardner has not shaved in several weeks, giving the Xavier High School senior a reddish-brown beard and a certain glow to his face.

It's a superstition that's coincided with the Class 4A playoffs. After what happened Friday night, there's no reason to grab his razor now.

Gardner scored three touchdowns in three distinct aspects of the game as the fourth-ranked Saints spanked No.10 Bettendorf, 31-7, in the semifinals at the UNI-Dome in Cedar Falls.

Gardner tallied on a 17-yard interception return, a 4-yard run from scrimmage and a 63-yard punt return to spark the Saints into the state championship game next Friday night in the Dome.

Xavier (12-1) will face top-ranked Dowling Catholic (13-0) at 7:06 p.m. Friday for the title.

"It's exciting," said Gardner, one of the most versatile players on a team that prides itself on versatility. "We've been in it before, but it's definitely different now that we're seniors."

The Saints lost to Ankeny, 23-17, in the state championship game last year when many of the players on this year's team were juniors. Now they're back.

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"We didn't want to expect to be back," said Hunter Baldus, who scored Xavier's first touchdown on a surprising 73-yard pass play. "We were willing to work hard. We did our job all summer and all season."

Baldus, a star defensive end, had caught only three passes for 45 yards this season as one of the team's tight ends, but he was the right guy in the right spot Friday.

Baldus caught a screen pass from Quinton Scholer, got big blocks from Louis Hasley and Tim Otting and took off along the west sideline. Nobody got in his way until the 5-yard line, when he cut past a Bettendorf defender and dove into the end zone.

That gave Xavier a 6-0 lead with 8:30 left in the first quarter. Ryan Persick's PAT made it 7-0.



"I think I had like two or three blocks out in front of me. They opened it up nicely," Baldus said. "I just ran from there. And then at the 10-yard line I think there was one person. I just saw him and I cut back."

Bettendorf (10-3) tied the game, 7-7, in the second period when Tyler Scheib caught a 34-yard touchdown pass from Cyle Cox, but the rest of the contest belonged to the Saints.

Gardner, who dropped an interception that would have gone for a touchdown early in the second quarter, got a second chance later in the stanza and didn't let it slip away again. He

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stepped in front of a pass at the Bettendorf 17-yard line, snared it cleanly and raced into the end zone for a 13-7 lead.

Persick's PAT made it 14-7 at halftime.

Gardner was kicking himself for missing the first interception, but he was a happy guy after the Bulldogs tried a similar play later in the quarter. "I thought they weren't going to throw it again and I wouldn't have another chance," he said.

But they did, running nearly the same play. Gardner saw the formation and sensed what was going to happen. "I figured they were going to do the same thing," he said. "I watched film and I saw they did the same thing before."

The Saints drove 53 yards for their third touchdown in the third period. Scholer passed 18 yards to Bryce Grimm, then lofted a 25-yard pass to Matt Nelson that the 6-foot-8, 250-pound senior lugged to the 4-yard line before four Bulldogs finally wrestled him to the ground.

Gardner promptly scored on a 4-yard scamper off the right side of the offensive line for a 20-7 lead. Persick made it 21-7 with 8:49 left in the third.

Bettendorf tried to punt the ball away from Gardner most of the night, knowing he leads Class 4A in punt returns, but they made a mistake and gave him a chance late in the third quarter. Gardner caught the ball at his own 37-yard line, broke into the clear, ran through a would-be tackler, kept his balance and finished the 63-yard return to make it 27-7.

Persick added the PAT and later drilled a 37-yard field goal in the fourth quarter to finish the scoring.

Xavier Coach Duane Schulte may have been tempted to sing Gardner's praises after the game, but stopped short.

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"I don't like to talk about guys until they're done. He's not done yet. He's got one more week," Schulte said, smiling. "Wes is a great kid and he tries to do whatever you ask him to do."

Baldus put it a little more succinctly when asked about Gardner's performance. "He's a hell of an athlete," Baldus declared.

Gardner tried to shrug off his big night, but allowed a small sense of pride to shine through. "It was a good feeling," he allowed, "especially since we got a win, too."

Neither team flashed a lot of offense in the UNI-Dome. Xavier finished with 208 yards and nine first downs, while Bettendorf collected 196 yards and nine first downs as both defensive units made it hard to move the ball.

The Saints came up with the big plays, however, scoring on offense, defense and special teams.

"Everybody always tries to focus on one part of the game, but it takes all three to have a successful game, season, career," Xavier Coach Duane Schulte remarked. "You have to try and execute all three parts."

Bettendorf Coach Aaron Wiley thought his club would have a chance to defeat Xavier if the Bulldogs didn't give up too many big plays. It came back to haunt him.

"We gave up an 80-yard touchdown pass, or whatever it was. We gave up a punt return and we gave up a Pick-6," he noted. "Other than that I thought we played great on defense. We beat them up, but they hit us with the big play and we couldn't answer that."

Bettendorf rushed for only 78 yards, with star tailback John McLaughlin netting just 45 yards

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after gaining 1,465 against everybody else this year. Cox hit only 10 of 40 passes for 118 yards as the Bulldogs tried going to the air.

"Their defense is as good as advertised," Wiley said. "There have got to be four or five all-state guys in there, I'd guess. They're legit. I don't know how you move the ball against those guys."

Bettendorf held Xavier tailback Brendan Miller to only 25 yards on 17 carries, but it was good enough to make Miller the all-time leading rusher in school history with 2,508 yards. Miller began the game tied with Will Martin (2005-2006) with 2,483.

The Saints won't be satisfied unless they win the state title next week, but they've rolled up a 25-2 record the past two years with two straight trips to the championship game.

"I'm super-excited for our kids and super-excited for our Xavier community," Schulte remarked. "You can't really appreciate it until you're all done, because you immediately think about the next game."

The next game will be the final game of the season, win or lose.

"I think we're all pretty excited about it," Gardner said. "We're prepared to get back to work and hopefully have the same outcome as tonight."

Dowling stopped West Des Moines Valley, 17-3, in the other semifinal Friday night.

XAVIER 31, BETTENDORF 7

CRX	BETT	
First downs	9	9
Rushes-yards	39-45	25-78
Passing yards	163	118

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Comp-Att-Int	6-14-1	10-40-1
Fumbles-lost	1-0	0-0
Punts-avg	9-42.2	10-34.9
Penalties-yards	2-30	5-45

Xavier	7	7	14	3 - 31
Bettendorf	0	7	0	0 - 7

CRX - Hunter Baldus 73 pass from Quinton Scholer (Ryan Persick kick)

BET - Tyler Scheib 34 pass from Cyle Cox (Charlie Cox kick)

CRX - Wes Gardner 17 interception return (Persick kick)

CRX - Gardner 4 run (Persick kick)

CRX - Gardner 63 punt return (Persick kick)

CRX - FG Persick 37

Individual statistics

Rushing

Xavier - Miller 17-25, Scholer 11-6, Ekland 3-1, Gardner 4-12, Grimm 2-4, Valentine 1-36, Team 1-minus.

Bettendorf - McLaughlin 12-45, Cyle Cox 9-19, Rees 2-8, Moffitt 2-6.

Passing

Xavier - Scholer 6-14-1-163.

Bettendorf - Cyle Cox 10-40-1-118.

Receiving

Xavier - Ekland 2-11, Baldus 1-73, Stark 1-36, Nelson 1-25, Grimm 1-18.

Bettendorf - Penrose 3-24, McLaughlin 3-6, Scheib 2-40, Ridenour 1-30, Heimendinger 1-18.