

Saints eye Wahlert in 3A semifinals

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - The Xavier Saints defeated Dubuque Wahlert, 78-74, in the final game of the regular season three weeks ago at Xavier.

If the Saints beat the 2014 state champions again Thursday, they'll be playing for the Class 3A state title themselves Saturday night.

Xavier (17-8) and Wahlert (16-9) clash in the 3A semifinals Thursday at 8:15 p.m. at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines. Williamsburg (24-1) plays LeMars (21-4) in the other semifinal at 6:35 p.m.

The winners meet Saturday at 6:05 p.m. for the crown.

Xavier had never won a game at the boys state tournament until it held on to defeat Pella, 65-61, Tuesday night in the opening round. Now the Saints have a rematch with Wahlert in the biggest game of the year so far.

Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann predicted three weeks ago that the Saints and Golden Eagles might see each other again in Des Moines. Now it's here.

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"I feel great about it," Luehrsmann said Tuesday night. "That means we're in the semifinals of the Class 3A state tournament. We're really looking forward to playing them again."

"It will be great to have two Mississippi Valley Conference teams down here. Hopefully we've got enough in us to pull it off."

Mitchell Burger poured in 25 points in Xavier's 78-74 victory over Wahlert three weeks ago. Adam McDermott collected 24 points, Michael Mims had 15 points and Calvin Winker added eight. The Saints shot 52.5 percent from the floor (21 of 40), 50 percent on 3-pointers (10 of 20) and 83.9 percent at the foul line (26 of 31) in that contest.

"We shot the ball extremely well the first time around and did a pretty good job defensively," said Luehrsmann. "And there was some luck that went our way."

Xavier leads the entire state (all classes) in free throw shooting at 77.6 percent this season. The Saints demonstrated their prowess against Pella in the quarterfinals Tuesday night when they hit 23 of 28, with McDermott nailing 15 of 16.

Wahlert has a veteran club that is battle-tested in Des Moines. Josh Carter scored 24 points against Xavier three weeks ago, Cordell Pemsf had 15 and Nolan Timp added 14.

"The first game (against Xavier) was a real battle. I expect this one to be, too," Wahlert Coach Tom English said Tuesday night. "Two teams that like to get up and down the floor a little bit."

"They've got a lot of guards that can handle it and shoot it. We're a little bit bigger and slower, so we'll see how the matchup goes."

Wahlert defeated Waverly-Shell Rock, 60-50, in the opening round Tuesday. Now two teams from the Mississippi Valley Conference will battle for a spot in the state finals.

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"It's great to see," said English. "It just shows how tough our conference has been all year long. You sometimes have to look beyond the records when you get two 3A teams like us and Xavier at the end of the season. It says a lot about the MVC."

The Saints had an 8-8 record after losing three straight games to Linn-Mar, Washington and Iowa City West during an eight-day stretch in late January and early February. They have not lost since and are riding a nine-game winning streak, including the victory over Wahlert.

"They're riding a wave of confidence right now," said English. "I think that gives them the edge against anybody. That started a few games prior to us. I think right now they feel pretty invincible, and we'll have to go out and do our best to control their offense."

Xavier had a 40-21 lead against Pella Tuesday night in the third quarter, but the Little Dutch outscored the Saints 18-4 in the last five minutes of the period and ultimately pulled within one point on three occasions. The Saints held on for dear life.

"We huddled up a couple of times and said, 'This is our game, we're not letting it go,'" said Winker, who scored seven points in the fourth quarter despite playing with four fouls. "We were never nervous. We knew it was ours."

Pemsl, a 6-foot-8 junior who has committed to the Iowa Hawkeyes, scored 17 points and grabbed 18 rebounds in Wahlert's victory over Waverly-Shell Rock. David Wedewer led the Golden Eagles with 19 points, Nolan Timp had 11 and Carter eight.

Xavier will play two more games in the state tournament, win or lose on Thursday. The consolation game for third place is s