

Wow! Saints top No. 1 Pella in thriller

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - The amazing Xavier Saints have rewritten all the rules for making the state finals.

They lost six games in a row to end the regular season, suspended their top scorer for two games in the playoffs, built a 16-point lead in the fourth quarter against the No. 1 team in the state in the semifinals, got into severe foul trouble, saw the lead dwindle all the way to three points and still found a way to win.

"Wow!" was the first word out of Coach Ryan Luehrsmann's mouth at the post-game press conference Thursday night after the Saints reached the state finals for the first time in school history.

The 10th-ranked Saints stunned Pella, 70-65, in the semifinals of the Class 3A state tournament in a wild and crazy game at the Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines.

Xavier (18-8) will face second-ranked Wahlert (21-5) in the state finals at 6:05 p.m. Saturday in a meeting of old friends and rivals from the Mississippi Valley Conference.

"We're real thrilled, just real thrilled with where our program is right now and the direction it's headed," Luehrsmann said. "We're surprised, and at the same time just thrilled to be in this position to be playing for a

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state title Saturday night."

Luehrsmann steered the Saints to a third-place finish at the state tournament last year, which at the time was the highest finish in school history. Now they'll finish higher than that.

Sophomore Jackson Joens played the game of his life for Xavier with six 3-pointers and 22 points, including four 3-pointers and 16 points in the third quarter alone.

"My teammates just kept passing me the ball and I kept shooting it," said Joens, who found open spots in the corners against Pella's pressure defense. "They kept telling me to shoot. And I had confidence to shoot.

"I've had games where I've shot pretty well, but not like that."



The Saints grabbed a 16-point lead at 60-44 with seven minutes left in the game on a bucket by Max Techau, but the Little Dutch went on a 17-4 run against the foul-plagued Saints and pulled within 64-61 with a little less than three minutes to go.

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At that point Matt Mims and Techau had four fouls, Ryan Stulken and Joens had three fouls and Nolan Butkowski was being treated for a severely sprained ankle.

"We were definitely thinking that we were going to pull it out," Pella coach Mark Core said. "We've been in this position before and we've been able to get over the hump. It just didn't happen tonight."

Instead of wilting, the Saints took a deep breath and battled back.

Techau scored to make it 66-61. Pella committed a turnover and Mitchell Burger canned two foul shots to make it 68-61 with 53.7 seconds left.

Pella got within 68-63 with 22 seconds to go, but Techau made a layup following passes from Burger and Stulken and it was 70-63 with just a few seconds left.

The Saints beat Pella in the first round of the state tournament last year and they got them again in the semifinals this year.

"We knew they were going to make a run," Luehrsmann said. "They're too good to not make a run."

"I'm just happy we were able to answer the call and keep our composure and make plays during winning time. We talk about that a lot."

Techau finished with 14 points and 10 rebounds. Stulken and Burger scored 11 points apiece. Mims collected nine points, six rebounds and six assists.

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Will Warner had 20 points and 10 assists for Pella (23-2). Ryan Van Wyk had 19 points and 15 rebounds.

The Saints committed 19 turnovers and were beaten on the backboards, 38-28, but they shot 54.2 percent and were 8 for 17 on 3-pointers. Pella grabbed 21 offensive rebounds, but shot only 38.5 percent for the game.

Xavier beat third-ranked Spirit Lake in the quarterfinals Tuesday and beat top-ranked Pella in the semifinals. Now the Saints will try to slay second-ranked Wahlerdt for the first state title in school history.

Wahlerdt beat Xavier, 68-56, in the final game of the regular season, handing the Saints their sixth loss in a row.

"We know they're a great team, the two-time defending champions," Techau said. "We'll look forward to it. It's a great matchup. You always want to play the best teams."

XAVIER (70): Mims 4 1-2 9, Butkowski 0 0-0 0, Joens 8 6-7 22, Stulken 5 0-0 11, Techau 7 0-0 14, Burger 2 6-6 11, Whitten 0 0-0 0, Schulte 0 3-4 3. Totals 26 10-12 70.

PELLA (65): Finney 2 0-0 6, Vande Lune 4 0-0 9, Warner 9 0-0 20, Van Wyk 7 5-9 19, Judkins 1 0-3 3, Scholten 0 1-3 1, Clayberg 1 1-1 3, Pringle 0 0-0 0, Holterhaus 1 2-2 4, Wassenaar 0 0-0 0. Totals 25 9-18 65.

Halftime - Xavier 28, Pella 21. 3-point goals - Xavier 8 (Joens 6, Stulken 1, Burger 1), Pella 6 (Finney 2, Warner 2, Vande Lune 1, Judkins 1).