

Saints stun Wahlert for 3A title

Written by Jim Ecker

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DES MOINES - Their head coach was called for a dubious technical foul that forced him to sit in his chair for most of the game and only one of their players made the all-tournament team, but none of that matters now.

The Xavier Saints are the Class 3A state champions and they finally have a banner to hang in their gym alongside all the other state championship banners from all their other sports.

Ryan Luehrsmann had tears in his eyes when the final buzzer sounded in Xavier's stunning 62-57 victory over Dubuque Wahlert in the finals of the boys state basketball tournament Saturday night at Wells Fargo Arena.

Wahlert was seeking its third state title in a row, but the Saints found a way to slow down 6-foot-8 all-star Cordell Pemsl and shock the world.

"It's just a surreal moment," said Luehrsmann. "People tell you to savor it and enjoy the moment. That's what I'm trying to do right now."

"It's so emotional," he said. "You get connected with these kids."

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Luehrsmann got slapped with a technical foul with 5:01 left in the second quarter, so according to the rules he had to sit in his chair the rest of the game except for timeouts and other stoppages of play.

Luehrsmann said he doesn't know what the technical was for. Xavier assistant coaches insisted there was no foul language or anything that was out of line or uncommon.

"You'd have to ask the ref," said Luehrsmann. "I've done a lot worse, I can tell you that. I didn't get a warning or anything. It was really a surprise."

Luehrsmann said it was "brutal" to have to sit in his chair the rest of the night, reminiscent of the old seat-belt rule that was revoked before the season.

Absolutely brutal," he said about having an assigned seat. "You can't coach your team as well if you can't get up and be able to interact a little more with them."

Luehrsmann credited his players for ignoring the technical and sticking "perfectly" to the game plan.

"At the end of the day," he said, "basketball is a player's game. And tonight they were big-time players."

Sophomore Jackson Joens led Xavier for the second straight contest with a game-high 18 points and made the all-tournament team, but none of the other Saints were selected by the media. Chariton, MOC-Floyd Valley and Pella also put one man on the all-tournament team and Dubuque Wahlert had two, including Pemsli as the MVP.

Luehrsmann said he was not bothered by the all-tourney selections.

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"Not at all. We're a true team," he remarked. "Cordell PemsI is one of the greatest players in Iowa high school basketball history. Just a terrific kid. He's very deserving of that honor."

PemsI, who will join the Iowa Hawkeyes next season, destroyed Xavier with 35 points and 11 rebounds when the Golden Eagles whipped the Saints 68-56 in the final game of the regular season on Senior Night in Dubuque, handing the Saints their sixth loss in a row, but the Saints were ready for the big guy this time with a variety of defensive alignments.

PemsI finished with only 15 points this time, although he did grab 13 rebounds.

"They were mixing it up a lot," said PemsI, who remembered seeing the Saints in a 2-3 zone, a 3-2 zone, a 1-3-1 zone and a man-to-man. "It seems like every time we came down the floor it was something new. We had a hard time adjusting to it.

"You have to tip your hat to them for being clutch and hitting shots and kind of taking us out of our rhythm the entire game."

Ryan Stulken, a 6-foot-7 senior, said communication was the key on defense. "It felt like we had him in control," he said.

The Saints may have tricked the Golden Eagles by not using all their defensive alignments during that first meeting in Dubuque.

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