

The Xavier Saints dug a little deeper Tuesday night and played basketball like they did in the Class 3A state tournament last year.

As far as the Saints are concerned, it was about time.

The Saints played their best game of the season and whipped Cedar Falls, 70-60, in a spirited Mississippi Valley Conference contest in the Ron Thillen Gymnasium.

Max Techau was a beast for Xavier (6-9) with 22 points and 13 rebounds, but he was not alone as the Saints got important contributions from lots of players against a quality opponent.

Matt Mims matched Techau with 22 points and ran the club superbly with seven assists, Jackson Joens popped in 13 points, new starter Quinn Schulte contributed seven points and helped "slow" Cedar Falls star AJ Green, and Nolan Butkowski nailed a pair of clutch 3-pointers.

The Saints also got some help from Gabe Lux, Max Johnson and Bryce Schulte off the bench, even though they did not score.

Green, a superb 6-foot-3 junior who leads the Mississippi Valley conference in scoring, finished with 33 points, but the Saints got some key stops against him when it really mattered in the fourth quarter, and the rest of the Tigers combined for only 27 points.

"It was our best effort for a full 32 minutes against a heck of a club with one of the best players in the state," said Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. "I'm just real happy for our guys that we finally closed one out."

Cedar Falls (9-6) took a 24-16 lead in the early stages of the second quarter with Green scoring practically at will, but the Saints fought back within 32-30 at halftime and outscored the Tigers 40-28 in the second half.

Techau, playing like a man possessed near the basket, gave the Saints the lead for good at 44-42 with a terrific inside move and made it 47-42 with a strong offensive rebound, putback and three-point play.

Xavier never trailed again, despite Green's best efforts with his quick moves, soft shot and four 3-pointers.

"The defense was great," said Luehrsmann. "Even though AJ had 33, I feel like we made him work for all of them. And the credit goes to the guys who were on him."

Xavier returned three starters and two key reserves from its state championship team of a year ago, but the Saints entered Tuesday's game with a disappointing 5-9 record and with no visible evidence that they might make another run this year.



That changed against Cedar Falls, which had spent much of the campaign in the Class 4A rankings before falling out of the Top 10.

"We've been frustrated this year," said Techau, a 6-foot-7 senior who scored the first seven points of the game for the Saints. "We've had our ups and downs, but we've never given up hope in each other.

"When we get our chemistry going like we did tonight, we think we can hang with a lot of people. Maybe they've counted us out, but we're not counting ourselves out."

Green pulled Cedar Falls within 50-49 with five minutes left with a fade away jumper, but Quinn Schulte blew to the basket for a layup, Mims followed with a layup on a break-out and Techau scored again inside to give the Saints a 56-49 lead with three minutes to go.

Quinn Schulte, who replaced his brother Bryce in the starting lineup, hit two clutch free throws with 1:16 left to make it 64-55 and Mims cashed a pair with 55 seconds remaining to make it 66-55 and the Saints were in the clear.

"We just really played together," said Mims. "I think that's what we need to do going forward. And hopefully this provides some confidence going forward.

"I think if we keep it up we'll be OK going through substate and hopefully we make it to state."

Mims had a flashback to the 2016 state tournament when the game was hanging in the balance in the second half.

"I honestly was thinking about that coming out of a timeout, that we've been in this position before," he remarked. "That kind of gave me confidence and my teammates the confidence to go out and execute and win."

Luehrsmann switched from a three-forward lineup to a three-guard lineup by inserting Quinn Schulte for Bryce Schulte, giving the Saints another ballhandler and perimeter defender. Luehrsmann said the starting lineup might change again, depending on matchups, but the new combo paid dividends against Cedar Falls.

Luehrsmann said Tuesday's performance reminded him "a little bit" of the state tournament, when the Saints played their best basketball of the season and won three straight exciting games.

"The guys were playing loose, playing aggressive, playing without fear," he remarked.

The Saints were hoping to continue their winning ways when the new season began after claiming the state title, but it did not happen.

"I don't think we handled the expectations well," said Luehrsmann. "We had to learn the hard way that it's a new year and a new team and you have to figure it out with different dynamics.

"Hopefully right now we're starting to click and figuring it out at the right time."

The Saints have six games left in the regular season, including several against tough opponents, but they're hoping to keep playing at a high level as the calendar turns to February.

"It's not too late," said Luehrsmann. "As long as you have a game on the schedule there's a chance to leave an impression. That's how we're viewing it right now.

"Every game for us, here on out, is a tournament game. We're viewing it that way. It's like win-or-go-home. That's the mentality we have now and hopefully it will carry us to some good things here at the end of the year."

CEDAR FALLS (60): Green 12 5-5 33, Wolf 2 0-0 4, Gerdes 1 2-4 4, Gary 1 0-1 2, Johnson 4 4-5 12, Gardner 0 0-0 0, Frericks 1 2-2 5, Campbell 0 0-0 0. Totals 21 13-17 60.

XAVIER (70): Lux 0 0-0 0, Mims 7 5-6 22, Butkowski 2 0-0 6, Joens 6 0-0 13, Q.Schulte 2 3-5 7, Techau 10 2-3 22, Johnson 0 0-0 0, B.Schulte 0 0-0 0. Totals 27 10-14 70.

Halftime - Cedar Falls 32, Xavier 30. 3-point goals - Cedar Falls 5 (Green 4, Frericks 1), Xavier 6 (Mims 3, Butkowski 2, Joens 1).