

## Confident Saints knock off Prairie

Written by Jim Ecker

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It took the Xavier Saints about two months to develop a new identity this season and get on a roll.

Now they hope it will carry them all the way to the Class 3A state tournament again.

The resurgent Saints marched to the foul line and topped Cedar Rapids Prairie, 60-56, in an intense Mississippi Valley Conference game at Ron Thillen Gymnasium.

The Saints have a modest 7-9 overall record at this point in the season, but they've won three straight games and have looked good in back-to-back wins over Cedar Falls and Prairie.

"We weren't playing well at the start of the year. To get a couple of wins here is great for us," said Jackson Joens, a veteran of last year's state champions. "We're just hoping to make another run down to Des Moines."

Xavier won the spirited game at the foul line, outscoring the visitors 22-3 at the charity stripe. The Saints shot 19 free throws in the second half and Prairie did not shoot any, a stat that did not escape the attention of the Hawks.

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Overall for the game, the Saints hit 22 of 25 free throws and the Hawks were 3 of 4. The Saints went 9 for 10 at the foul line in the final 82 seconds to secure the victory.

Prairie defeated Xavier by four points at Prairie last month, so Friday's outcome left them tied at 126-126 for the campaign.

"Great effort by both teams," said Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann. "It was a well-played game, I thought.

"They're awfully hard to cover. They have so many guys that shoot it and have high basketball IQs and make good decisions."

Joens popped in four 3-pointers and led Xavier with 19 points, despite missing a chunk of time with minor foul problems. Matt Mims collected 15 points, five rebounds and five assists for the Saints.

Nolan Butkowski scored nine clutch points in the second half, Max Techau contributed eight points despite battling the flu, and sophomore Quinn Schulte scored seven points, all on vital free throws.

The Saints have found an identity in recent games with Quinn Schulte in the starting lineup and his older brother Reggie coming off the bench, instead of the other way around.

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