

Xavier's victory leaves Lilly in tears

Written by Jim Ecker

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Tom Lilly has won 522 games and four state titles during his 32 years as a girls basketball coach, but his emotional well still runs deep after all that time.

Lilly dissolved in tears Tuesday night after the sixth-ranked Xavier Saints trimmed 13th-ranked Waverly-Shell Rock, 42-38, in the regional finals to earn a trip to the Class 4A state tournament.

Lilly hugged long-time assistant coach and pal Stephanie Potts after the buzzer sounded in the intense ballgame and he needed his trademark blue towel to wipe away the tears.

"It's always a special moment," Lilly said after getting his emotions under control. "I just felt our seniors have given us so much this year.

"I knew that at the end of it, somebody was going to be extremely disappointed because it was very hard-fought, it was back and forth, neither team was going to give an inch.

"And we just happened to prevail with a 14-year-old," he said with a wry smile. That's pretty amazing on how that all works out."

Freshman Caitlynn Daniels is actually 15 now, but the rookie made two of the biggest plays in the game in the final minute with the state berth on the line.

Her driving layup with 29 seconds left snapped a 38-38 tie and gave the Saints a 40-38

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advantage, and then she promptly stole the ball at the other end with 11 seconds remaining.

"I knew that we had to go to the hoop when we had the chance, because Waverly had tough defense," Daniels said about her game-winning shot. "I saw the ball coming and I knew I had to go for it."

Senior Lexi Noonan clinched the victory with two cold-blooded free throws with 3.6 seconds left to make it 42-38 and punch Xavier's ticket to the state tournament with their 10th straight win.

Xavier (17-6) will face Grinnell (19-4) in the opening round on Tuesday, Feb. 28 at 8:30 p.m. at the Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines. The Saints are seeded No. 6 for the tournament and Grinnell is seeded No. 3.

Daniels has been Xavier's starting point guard all season and has done a remarkable job for a ninth grader. A few weeks ago Lilly told the unselfish freshman to take more shots and she accepted the challenge in the biggest game of the year.

Daniels, Noonan and the rest of the Saints celebrated the victory with gusto.

"It's pretty cool, I'm not going to lie," said Daniels.

Noonan, a cool customer, led Xavier with 18 points. She missed four free throws along the way, but hit nothing but net to secure the victory in the final seconds.

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