

Healthy Joens helps Saints top Mount Vernon

Written by Jim Ecker

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MOUNT VERNON - Welcome back, Jackson Joens.

The Xavier Saints were mighty glad to have you on their side again Thursday night when it really counted.

Joens returned to the lineup after missing two games with a concussion and played a key role as Xavier topped seventh-ranked Mount Vernon, 63-55, in the Class 3A district finals at Mount Vernon.

Joens popped in 19 points as the Saints (12-11) earned a spot against Dubuque Wahlert (7-15) in the substate finals Monday night at 6:30 at the U.S. Cellular Center, with the winner advancing to the Class 3A state tournament in Des Moines.

Joens suffered a concussion Feb. 14 when the Saints beat Wahlert, 71-52, and was idle for more than a week, but he finally got the green light to play again Wednesday.

"I got cleared yesterday," he said. "I went to our trainer to see if I could play and I was pretty happy, pretty excited.

"They had me do a concussion test. They asked me a bunch of words and a bunch of numbers and stuff."

He got all the answers right, but does not want to go through all of that again. "Not fun," he said.

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Joens missed his first three 3-pointers Thursday as the Saints got off to a slow start and trailed 15-9 after the first quarter, but the visitors took control from there and dominated the middle periods.

Joens made four 3-pointers and hit a series of clutch baskets.

"If we didn't have him tonight, I don't think we would have won," Xavier Coach Ryan Luehrsmann declared.

"He was huge. Just to have another shooter out there, another guy with a great feel for the game. And he made some big shots tonight, just like we needed him to."

The Saints also got a big boost on the offensive end from sophomore Quinn Schulte, who scored a career-high 14 points. Matt Mims, Nolan Butkowski and Max Techau netted 10 points apiece as all five starters reached double figures and provided all 63 points.

Schulte and Butkowski also excelled on defense, sharing man-to-man duties against Mount Vernon star Austin Ash, who will be joining the Iowa Hawkeyes as an invited walk-on next season.

Ash finished with 24 points, but he scored half of those points in the fourth quarter after the Saints had already built a 12-point lead and he got seven of his points in the final minute.

Schulte and Butkowski were star defensive backs for the Xavier football team last season and they used some of those football skills to stick with Ash all night.

"In football, it's staying low and that kind of translates into basketball," Schulte explained. "Guarding Ash, we had to stay low and not let him get by, but also get a hand up so he can't hit the 3."

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Ash, who averages 23 points, did most of his scoring at the foul line, cashing 13 of 15 free throws to go with five field goals.

Luehrsmann told Schulte and Butkowski to make Ash work for everything he got.

"Those guys have been tested all year," he noted. "They played against AJ Green (Cedar Falls), they played against Connor McCaffery (Iowa City West), they played against Devontae Lane (Iowa City West).

"So we're used to seeing really good players. And he (Ash) was special. He's right in that category the way Austin played for them tonight."

Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery sat at mid-court in the Mount Vernon gym to watch Ash and enjoy the game, and he gave Luehrsmann - a former Hawkeye guard under Tom Davis and Steve Alford - a warm greeting after the contest.

Joens, a 3-point specialist, missed his first three triples of the game as the Saints struggled to get untracked, but he was 4-of-5 the rest of the way as he got hot and came on strong.

"I felt like I was rushing my shot and not getting in the pace of things," he explained. "Once that first one went in I started feeling it."

The Saints rallied for a 27-23 lead at halftime and took control in the third period, opening a 12-point bulge at 42-30. The Saints outscored the Mustangs, 33-15, in the second and third quarters.

Schulte hit a pair of free throws to make it a 14-point advantage at 51-37 with 4:52 left in the game, then he made a layup for a 16-point lead at 53-37 and the die was cast.

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Mount Vernon (17-6) did not pull closer than 11 points again until Ash made three free throws with nine seconds left in the game.

The Saints shot exceptionally well after the slow start, hitting 25 of 39 for 64 percent. Schulte, not known as a big scorer, was 5-for-6 from the floor, hit all four of his free throws and collected four assists, including one where he slipped and still managed to feed Butkowski for a layup and 42-30 lead.

"My teammates were moving the ball a lot and it just happened that I got open looks," said Schulte, "so I just tried to take it in there."

Xavier has won eight straight playoff games the last two years, including a victory over Dubuque Wahlert in the Class 3A championship game last March. Now the Saints and Golden Eagles will meet again with a trip to Des Moines hanging in the balance.

"It's going to be fun," said Mims, who finished with seven assists. "I've never played at the Cell Center, so it's definitely going to be a memorable game."

This will be the fourth straight year that Xavier and Wahlert will be meeting in the postseason tournament. On the previous three occasions, the winner became the state champion. The Golden Eagles won back-to-back crowns in 2014 and 2015 and the Saints won the title last year.

Wahlert was missing three key players when the Saints beat them by 19 points two weeks ago and Luehrsmann expects a much stiffer challenge in the rematch Monday.

"We're trying to become like a Wahlert," he said. "That's kind of our goal, to become a basketball school in some regards like they are."

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Joens is happy to be playing again, especially with the stakes getting higher in each game.

"It's very exciting, especially playing Wahlert," he said. "We played them last year at state, so it will be a lot of fun."

Wahlert defeated eighth-ranked Davenport Assumption, 61-53, Thursday night in the district finals at Assumption.

XAVIER (63): Lux 0 0-0 0, Mims 4 1-3 10, Butkowski 3 4-4 10, Joens 7 1-2 19, Q. Schulte 5 4-4 14, Techau 5 0-0 10, B. Schulte 0 0-0 0. Totals 24 10-13 63.

MOUNT VERNON (55): Baty 0 0-0 0, Snedden 0 0-0 0, Adams 4 3-3 11, Golberg 0 0-0 0, Booth 2 0-0 6, Z. Krogmann 3 0-0 6, Wright 0 0-0 0, Leopold 2 0-0 5, Ash 5 13-15 24, J. Krogmann 1 1-2 3, Bootsmiller 0 0-0 0. Totals 17 17-20 55.

Halftime - Xavier 27, Mount Vernon 23. 3-point goals - Xavier 5 (Joens 4, Mims 1), Mount Vernon 3 (Booth 2, Leopold 1, Ash 1).